Means of Influence

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Means of Influence

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Summary

Part Three of the AU where Hannibal is a troubled FBI profiler and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

When Hannibal holds the case file out to him Will looks at it guardedly, the way one might regard a snake that may or may not be venomous. After a beat, he leans forward and takes it.

"Heavy," Will comments. He looks up at Hannibal. "Am I being accused of something?"

"These aren't yours," Hannibal says. He adds, perhaps a bit too quickly, "I wouldn't want you to think that I considered the possibility that they might be."

Will raises an eyebrow. "That bad?"

Six Weeks From Now

“Well, it’s official,” Hannibal says, climbing back behind the steering wheel and sitting the print edition of Tattle Crime on the dashboard. “I’ve killed you.”

His eyes skim over the text of the article again:

Early this afternoon the FBI announced that former profiler, Hannibal Lecter, is wanted in conjunction with disappearance of local psychologist and possible lover Will Graham… Lecter has been sought in connection to the murder of millionaire philanthropist Mason Verger, but sources within the FBI have suggested that this might be only one of as many as a dozen killings linked to the notoriously violent Lecter…

And Will, sitting low in the stolen car’s passenger seat, turns to look at him from beneath the hood of a heavy sweatshirt. It’s barely autumn, and the nip in the air is soft as a love bite, but Will shivers even with the heater blowing at its highest setting.

His face is pale and bloodless, and there are dark circles under his eyes. The scar that Hannibal gave him gleams brightly under the gas station lights, the slash of pink brilliant against the pallid whiteness.

“Wonderful,” he says, offering Hannibal a ghost of a smile, then hugs himself more tightly.

Hannibal puts a hand on Will's knee as he pulls the car back out onto the road, and Will curls icy fingers around it.

Chapter 2

The case file is heavy in Hannibal's hand, but he feels calm.

He'd wanted to go to Will's house with it last night, to bang on the door until Will let him in, no matter how worn out or in pain he was, but Hannibal recognized how unwise that would be, and how rude. He waited instead.

The office is a better place for this, anyway. It is not exactly neutral ground, but it's the closest thing to it that they have between one another, and doesn't carry the residual bitter scent of something sweet suddenly tainted, the way that the table in Will's kitchen does.

"Jack Crawford gave me this last night," Hannibal says, after they have taken their accustomed seats across from one another. "I want you to see it."

When Hannibal holds the file out to him Will looks at it guardedly, the way one might regard a snake that may or may not be venomous. After a beat, he leans forward and takes it.

"Heavy," Will comments. He looks up at Hannibal. "Am I being accused of something?"

"These aren't yours," Hannibal says. He adds, perhaps a bit too quickly, "I wouldn't want you to think that I considered the possibility that they might be."

Will raises an eyebrow. "That bad?"

Hannibal lifts his chin. "These are families," he says. A pause. "The women have been raped."

Hannibal does not say that there is, regardless, something about the case that reminds him of Will. The M.O.s couldn't be more different, but the killings in the file strike Hannibal very much as the work of a man who is trying desperately to convince himself that he is a monster rather than a victim.

"This is the Tooth Fairy file."

Again, Hannibal nods.

"Why do you have it?"

Hannibal motions for Will to open the file, suspending the question for now.

There's no fascination in these photos for Will. He studies them closely, making sure that he understands what he is seeing, but puts each one aside as quickly as he can. Hannibal is struck by what a relief that is to him.

Will stops at one of the pictures. He holds it up for Hannibal to see; Charles Leeds, slumped over and dead on the floor in his daughter's bedroom. "He got up and fought," Will says, with

a kind of awe. "Even with his throat cut, he rose from his bed and fought to save his children."

"It didn't make any difference."

"I admire it though, don't you?" Will turns the picture back around and looks down at it thoughtfully. "He tried so hard to protect them. It makes me feel proud for him."

"What difference does it make, what he tried to do? The girl's dead, along with the rest of her family. He failed."

"You see your own failure in him. That isn't fair to either of you, Hannibal."

Hannibal refuses to answer.

"We'll need to talk about that someday," Will warns him, but gently. "What is it that you need to talk with me about now?"

"I'm taking this case."

"I gathered. Where do I play into it?"

"I want you to tell me what I should be careful of, so I can keep you - keep the both of us - safe."

"If you're really invested in that, you wouldn't take the case at all. You should keep yourself out of the FBI's line of sight," Will says. Hannibal wants to argue with the annoyed note in his voice, but Will raises a hand for silence. "Never mind, I can see that it's important to you, and anyway, what could I actually do to stop you?"

It's an improvement, Hannibal supposes, that he isn't trying out threats.

"But Hannibal, I'm not really in a position to know. You should be the one telling me what to be careful about."

It's the opening Hannibal's been maneuvering for, and he jumps in with both feet.

"Get rid of the torture basement."

Will makes an dismissive sound and tosses himself back in his chair, then grimaces at the pain when his back thumps against the back of the chair. "No. I don't think I will," he says.

"It's foolish," Hannibal says bluntly. "If there's a fire or any number of other emergencies, you're cooked. A good hearted burglar might even report on you. And that's to say absolutely nothing of what's going to happen if they come at you with a search warrant. There shouldn't be *anything* in the house that could be used as evidence against you. No body parts or other trophies, Will.

"*Move it*, at least. Find a new work space. Buy some fixer-upper out in the country under a false name and make sure that it can't be connected to you and you can't be connected back

to it."

Will obviously wants to argue, but the idea catches him despite himself. "That's something to consider," he says thoughtfully.

"I'm not asking you to take it under consideration. It's a prerequisite, if we're going to be together."

Will's eyes narrow. "Don't try and control me," he warns Hannibal. "You're not going to like how I am with people who think that they can control me."

It's on the tip of Hannibal's tongue to tell Will to grow up, or else to return Will's threat with his own. He keeps his own tempter tightly in check, though - one of them needs to.

"You aren't safe while it's there, and if you're at risk then so am I - every minute we spend together I'm more deeply implicated. And Will, I can't… be at ease in your home while I know what's downstairs. The memories are difficult."

"I understand why you would feel that way," Will says, and Hannibal is fairly confident that the sympathy in his voice is sincere. The distress that follows certainly is, for all its selfishness. "That was a bad weekend for me, too, and I don't like to think about it myself. But Hannibal, I've no intention of hurting you. You know that, don't you?"

Hannibal doesn't point out the fact that less than a minute has passed since Will last threatened him. The important thing - aside from the gratification that comes with seeing how upsetting the idea of Hannibal being afraid of him is to Will - is that Will is bargaining now, and that means that Hannibal has essentially already won.

He waits Will out. It doesn't take very long.

"I can't do anything one way or the other until my back is healed," Will says, temporizing.

"I'll help you to disassemble and move the equipment," Hannibal says, fully aware that he is taking another step towards the inevitable ruination of the life that he's made for himself. "We can put it in a storage unit until you find somewhere else to set up," he adds, temporizing himself.

Will hoods his eyes. Hannibal isn't sure if it's admiration or annoyance that's shadowing Will's face. He sighs. "What else? You should tell me now."

"You know what else," Hannibal says flatly.

Hannibal doesn't want to speak directly of the meat. He doesn't want to face up to that yet. If they speak of it, he will have to ask Will why he did that to him - what caused him to want to harm Hannibal in that specific way - and Hannibal is not ready to try to understand the answer, whatever it is.

Will understands, though. He tries to be defiant at first, meeting Hannibal's steady stare with a glare, but it does not take long for him to begin to cave beneath Hannibal's gaze.

His face twitches. He squirms, and his eyes dart around the room, unable to meet Hannibal's directly. Will's lower lip finds its way between his teeth and he worries it, fiercely enough that Hannibal wonders if he might draw blood.

"I won't do that again, not to you," Will says at last, and Hannibal leans over to bridge the distance between them and puts a hand on Will's knee.

"Thank you," he tells Will.

Chapter 3

Hannibal ends up doing most of the work, but it doesn't really bother him.

In his life he has had to learn to pick his battles, and the fact that Will has agreed to the dismantling of the special fixtures in the basement without a considerable amount of griping or dramatics is a solid victory.

Claiming infirmity despite the fact that he's had almost two weeks to recover, Will sits on the edge of the bed. Occasionally, he fiddles idly with a screwdriver and the screws at the end of the chain that had held Hannibal, but mainly Will just watches him.

Hannibal likes the feeling of Will's eyes on his body. He can sense the admiration like breath against his skin, even when he is looking away from Will.

"Break time," Hannibal announces, straightening up from the sturdy cardboard box that he's just taped shut.

"You've earned it," Will agrees. It's surprising, how much work Hannibal has gotten done in only a couple of hours. "You're so industrious." It had taken Will much longer to set the place up, though he supposes there are other reasons for that beyond his relative lack of productivity as compared to Hannibal.

The process of putting the setup together had been for Will extremely emotional. He'd stopped many times as the welter of feelings provoked by seeing each new fixture put into place left him overcome and dazed. There was excitement, yes, and he was pleased with himself and eager to put the space to good use, but there was more to it than that.

Will was not willing then - nor is he now - to acknowledge the extent to which the tangle of emotions that so floored him were colored by a sense of existential dread at where he was taking himself and what the consequences of that might have on who he was fundamentally.

By then, Will had already killed several people. He'd even used the dogs to run down a man who Will knew for a fact had violated the sister of one of the boys he'd played with as a child, and when the hounds pulled the rapist down to the ground and held him there while Will bent to force the knife between his ribs he'd felt none of the pity or regret that often came upon him when he killed a caught hog, not even when he yanked the man's head up by the hair, neck arched and blubbering face pulled up toward Will, and watched the expressions on that face change as the ruptured heart sluggishly pumped his life's blood out into the mud.

Killing was not new to him but there was something different about creating a specific space just for that particular type of work. Installing the drains; considering the positioning of the meat hooks and then placing them; bolting to the floor the stainless steel table with its wrists and ankle restraints; hanging the pegboard that would hold many of his tools; reconsidering the placing of the meat hooks as inconvenient and moving them; drilling the hole in the

cement for the stake that would hold the chain that would eventually, nearly a decade later, bind Hannibal, and the refilling that hole with fresh cement.

The basement setup introduced a new degree of calculation to the act of killing. Having the space made him dependent on it - not in the sense of it being the only place where he killed, but rather in that once it existed there was no question but that it would be used. There was no telling himself that he was going to stop with that setup waiting for him in the basement, no lying to himself about how the last one really would be his last.

It became a permanent fixture in his life, as reflective of who he had worked to become and how he thought about himself as the diplomas that hung in his office.

Strange then, how easy it is to watch Hannibal box everything up and carry it away.

Hannibal sits down on the bed right beside Will, crowding into his personal space. He hooks his arm around Will's lower back, the tips of his fingers extending almost far enough to reach his navel, but keeps the touch light. Then he leans the side of his head against Will's shoulder.

"All right?" Hannibal asks. He has done things like this several times since they returned to Baltimore, and he always asks Will that question and he always says it just like that - two distinct words, with no blurring between them.

"You're trying to desensitize me," Will says, and his voice is small and breathless from the tightness in his chest.

"Acclimate, more like," Hannibal says. "Is it working?"

"Not as quickly as I'd like," Will admits. The sense of embarrassed shame catches up with him almost as soon as he's said this, and Will casts about for another topic.

"What's it like being back at work?" he asks, finding one.

"It feels good," Hannibal says. "They see that I've changed, I think, and that I'm still changing. It's been easier to be more easy going, to open up a bit. That's thanks to you, you know."

Will doesn't answer. He smiles, though, and he feels Hannibal shift his head to look up at him, and knows that Hannibal can see that he is smiling.

"I think that Beverly Katz wants to be my friend," Hannibal goes on, and when Will feels his breath on his collarbone he shutters like a goose has walked over his grave. "Or at least, she is considering the possibility of friendship. Evaluating me. She asks me questions, and actually listens when I answer, and weighs those answers against her own sense of judgment rather than taking for granted what other people say.

"I like her."

"I'm glad, Hannibal," Will says. "You deserve to have friends, and it's not good for you to be as isolated as you have been." But though he is self-aware enough to know at least some of

the disquiet the idea provokes in him is simply jealousy, he's not sure that's all of it.

Will's guards his voice carefully, but he thinks Hannibal has picked up on at least some of it, because he says, "I'm not letting her too close, though. She's too sharp for me to risk that - she's as much of a hunter as any of the killers she's helped to catch. But I do like her."

"What about the case?"

Hannibal withdraws his touch. On the one hand, that's fine with Will because he'd been beginning to feel overwhelmed anyway. But the way Hannibal folds in on himself troubles Will. The case has weighed heavy on him, and has been taking up almost all of his time.

Will is more than willing to be a sounding board for Hannibal to bounce ideas off of, but Hannibal hasn't wanted to talk about it. He's told Will that he wants to keep his ideas about the case and the man he is hunting firmly separated from Will and the feelings that he has for him, and Will supposes he understands that.

But now Hannibal says, "He's on a moon cycle. The last one was four days before we came back, during the full moon - that's two weeks gone now. Half our time washed away, and nothing meaningful to show for it."

Hannibal hesitates. "I've been thinking about ways to flush him out, maybe make him angry enough to do something stupid."

Will feels that tinge of anxiety again, and scooches closer to Hannibal. "You be careful," he says, and takes Hannibal's hand in his own to squeeze it tight.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The letter the Tooth Fairy sends Hannibal is bloviating and shallow in its inflated sense of self-importance, the work of a man who believes himself to be less than nothing but whom is trying desperately to convince everyone else - himself most of all - that he is something fearsome and uncanny rather than simply pathetic.

The one-sided banter is stilted, hack dialogue written by an author who has had precious few real human conversations to draw on. Hannibal's eyes return to the line, *I thought, Dare I? Of course I do* , again, and he cringes physically.

He is not usually given to second-hand embarrassment, but the Dragon's letter provokes it; even the moniker, **THE GREAT RED DRAGON**, typed in all capitals and bolded, is pitiful in its fragile grandiosity. The only thing it has going for it is that is marginally less "inappropriate" (as the Dragon notes in his letter) than "the Tooth Fairy," and Hannibal finds himself adopting the new label inside his head out of a vague sense of charity.

The letter chides Hannibal for working on with the FBI, as though this constitutes a betrayal of some sort of solidarity he owes to the Dragon, and at once scolds him for allowing Freddie Lounds to publish such disparaging lies about him while at the same time commiserating with him over the bad press, claiming empathy as someone else who is also poorly understood by small people with even smaller minds.

What particular body I currently occupy is trivia... The important thing is what I am BECOMING. I know that you alone can understand this, and I have some things that I'd love to show you very soon.

The letter is naked in its longings, shamefully vulnerable in ways in which the author seems entirely unaware. Hannibal is certain that he must be painfully shy.

When Hannibal shows it to Will he reads it quickly then thrusts it away from himself. It flutters off the edge of the desk and lands on the floor. "He's attracted to you," Will says, his nostrils flaring. And then, "Goddamn fucking closet case *weirdo* ."

Hannibal isn't sure that Will is right about that, but he is willing to admit to himself that the jealousy is gratifying, even if it makes Will foolish.

He picks up the letter carefully. It's only a copy, but to him it still feels like evidence.

"I don't think it's as simple as that," he says. "It's not sexual, or romantic either. He believes that I am in possession of some great power or ability that I have unwisely opted to hide under a bushel, but that he might be able to… consume for himself. If he kills me."

Will is about to say something to that when there comes the sound of someone knocking on the waiting room door. Will startles and Hannibal goes rigid.

The knocking comes again, an insistent sing-song rhythm, and then a voice calls out, “I know you’re in there, Dr. Graham. I can see your car in the parking lot.”

The voice puts Hannibal’s teeth on edge for reasons that he can’t immediately identify.

Will curses under his breath, then he stands and goes to answer the door.

In the short walk from Will’s office through the waiting room and to the entrance, Hannibal watches Will compose himself, reigning in the hostility and smothering his anxiety.

By the time Will opens the door, he is the picture of detached professional charm.

“Good evening, Mason,” Will says. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Chapter End Notes

Expecting A Lot of Stuff to go down in the next one. :)))

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Just a heads up - this one is fairly heavy on emotional and physical violence. There's also very vague/implied references to CSA/rape and violence to animals.

Will makes the briefest of introductions, and when Mason steps forward to shake Hannibal's hand Will sees the disgust flutter across Hannibal's face as he catches Mason's scent.

When their hands touch Will can tell that Hannibal is at war with himself to keep from either jerking away from Mason or else crushing the moist palm in his fist. Touching Mason, Will knows from experience, is like handling room-temperature raw pork.

Nonetheless, aside from that one quick tell, Hannibal's face remains carefully neutral. If Will did not know him well enough to know better, he supposes he would read the expression as indifferent.

But Will is sensitive to the disgust that is flowing off Hannibal in waves, and to the way anger is boiling just beneath his skin. He knows that it makes Hannibal want to do something - hit something.

Will can relate, but he keeps the polite smile fixed on his face as he steps forward and shakes Mason's hand in turn.

When he steps back, Will finds Hannibal looming behind him, very close and focused on Mason with the intensity of a trained attack dog. He puts a protective hand over Will's shoulder, and Will finds that his face wants to do several different things in response to that touch; he wants to snarl a challenge at Mason and to cringe at the conflict he can see coming and to smile up at Hannibal with gratitude.

Instead, his lays his own hand on top of Hannibal's briefly and then pats his fingers gently for Hannibal to let go. The hand drops from Will shoulder.

"Go on and head home," Will tells Hannibal. "I can't imagine that this will take too long, but it's late. We don't want to keep you up."

"Okay," Hannibal says. "Call me when you get done." But he turns to shut the entrance door behind himself Hannibal cuts his eyes towards Will, asking if he should really leave.

I know how to handle Mason, Will tries to tell him with his eyes.

But Will sees the stubbornness coming into Hannibal's face, just before the door clicks closed.

Will takes Mason into his office and gestures towards the chair where he would usually seat a patient. Mason flops down onto it as Will lowers himself into his own and crosses his legs.

Mason cuts his eyes towards the door. “Is that your… what? Boyfriend? *Partner*?”

Will knows that his neutral smile does not flicker. “What can I do for you, Mason?”

Mason leans forward, his overly bright butcher’s blue eyes on Will’s own. “I expected you to stop seeing Margot when I cut off her insurance coverage,” he tells Will.

“What can I say, Mason? It’s not as though I’m hurting for money, and anyway I’ve always been too soft hearted to turn away someone who needs me.” He knows that Mason is trying to stare him down, but it doesn’t bother Will; he knows also that he is stronger than Mason, and he returns the gaze evenly. “You’re the same way, aren’t you? Always so giving, so charitable. *Helped* any new orphans lately?”

“I see how this is,” Mason says, and grins a big lopsided shiteating grin. Will feels his face twitching toward the expression, wanting to mirror it, and he stomps hard on the impulse, disgusted with himself. “You share my sister proclivities so you’re looking out for her especially. That’s how you people are, isn’t it?”

Will leans forward, and now his mimicry of Mason’s posture and smug grin are deliberate, a sort of threat, even if Mason is not sensitive to the implications; *I know what is inside of you.*

“Someday, Mason, you’re going to learn a thing or two about my *proclivities.*”

Mason’s expression is manic humor edged with undisguised disgust. “Are you coming on to me, Dr. Graham?

“No - no, I don’t want to know the answer,” he says, when Will doesn't bother to reply, condescendingly certain that he already knows the answer.

Mason looks around the office with transparent boredom, and his eyes fix on a picture of Will’s best hounds that hangs above the settee. “You breed dogs, don’t you?”

Will nods politely.

“I’m interesting in breeding too, of course. *Deeply interested* . It’s a passion of mine - the key to my family’s success for generations. Right now my current project is a special, new type of pig.

“Or an old one, depending on how you look at it. I’m breeding the ferocity - the wildness - back into them.”

He has pictures of his project on his phone, and insists that Will look at them. The pigs are pink and stubby legged and fat, in no way any less soft-looking than any domestic hog that Will has ever seen.

He’s heard stories about Mason’s special pigs from Margot. Mason has been threatening her with them for years now, and Will has no doubt that she has good reason to be afraid of them. But any pig would eat a person, given training or an empty enough belly, especially if that person was made to be unable to fight back.

Will wants to take the wind out of Mason's sails.

“A bowhunter in the parish I grew up in took a feral hog that weighed five hundred and forty-nine pounds last year. Now - I will allow that your boars might run bigger than that, penned up and given free access to as much feed as they can swallow, but I don’t imagine that there’s nearly as much hard muscle on them, and I know for a fact that their tusks won’t measure up to the four and a quarter inches that big boy grew, would they?”

That annoys Mason, and he stands up and begins to stalk around the office, peering that the spines of books or the art that’s on the wall. Will tracks him until Mason moves out of his field of vision, but does not deign to turn to follow him with his eyes.

“You should come out hunting with me sometime - I’ll show you what a real pig looks like.” And he thinks, *I’ll show you a mirror. I'll show you your own face, reflected in the flat of my knife, just before I stick you in the heart.*

There is an air of inevitability, somehow, to what happens next.

Coming up behind Will, Mason locks his fingers around Will’s curls. It’s like having worms in his hair, moist and unclean, and now that Mason is so close to him Will can smell the pig on him, much stronger than the stink Cordell had carried.

Mason jerks Will’s head back, baring his neck, and Will feels the point of a penknife poke against his Adam’s apple.

“Have you ever lost a dog to a pig, Dr. Graham? I understand that happens more often than most hog hunters are willing to admit.”

Everything about how Mason is holding the knife is wrong, and Will fights the desire to laugh at him.

“You’ve never killed your own meat, have you, Mason? Imagine that - an empire built on pork, and you haven’t the stomach to do more that stick them in the rump with that piddly little pen knife.”

“Never too late to learn,” Mason say, and Will feels the bite of the blade against his skin.

And then Hannibal is there.

When his hands close over both of Mason’s and Will can hear the bones grinding together and snapping like twigs, and the pen knife falls to the floor and the grip on Will’s hair releases and Mason howls.

Hannibal shoves him to the floor and Mason lands hard on his side, and he is scrambling to get to his knees when Hannibal takes four quick, long strides toward him and puts all of that momentum into the kick that lands on the small of Mason's back. Will hears something fundamental to Mason's spine give away with a loud crack and his legs go utterly limp and now there is helpless terror in Mason's screaming as well as pain and outrage.

The three of them are almost certainly alone in the office block, given the lateness of the evening, but that doesn't mean that Mason's noise isn't a risk.

"Turn him over," Will says with urgency, and Hannibal takes Mason's legs and flips him over onto his back. Will straddles Mason and kneels on top of his flailing arms, then he clamps one hand over over Mason's mouth and forces his jaw shut with the other. Mason's screaming become muffled squeals.

Will lowers his head until he is so close to Mason that their noses almost touch. He locks eyes with Mason, noting with some interest that his eyes are a brighter shade of blue when frightened.

"Funny thing about pigs," Will tells him, speaking with a low voice. "They're one of the few prey species that screams when they feel the bite of a fang or a blade or a bullet. The only ones, I think, who manage to sound so *outraged* when they've been hurt. It's as though they possess the real expectation that the hunter will stop hurting them if they yell, and are terribly affronted when they aren't heeded.

"I don't think that they really understand that they're meat. You're meat too, Mason. I'm going to help you to make sure that you understand that," Will tells him, and watches Mason's face turn an apoplectic shade of red.

Hannibal makes a small sound from above him, and when Will looks up and sees Hannibal's face he knows that he will be unable to keep the delight from bubbling visibly from beneath the detached facade that he is trying to keep up, but that there is no reason to worry because Hannibal will not hold this against him - not this time anyway.

"Give me your handkerchief," Will tells Hannibal, then he pulls his own pocket square from his pocket. He yanks Mason's pocket square free as well and balls them all together, and Will never notices that one of Hannibal's hairs is sticking to his own pocket square, having fallen into Will's pocket when Hannibal rested his forehead against Will's clavicle earlier that day.

When he jams the wadded ball of cloth into Mason's mouth the hair goes in there as well, and is unnoticed by anyone - least of all Mason - as it is pressed against the side of Mason's cheek.

"So, what are we going to do next?" Will asks. "We could call the police - tell them it was self-defense and let them take care of him. Hell, that's the truth anyways."

There is something avid in Hannibal's eyes - something wonderful that Will is only now seeing for the first time - as he considers the possibilities.

“He won’t leave it at that, though, will he?” Hannibal answers. “He’ll come for us, first chance he gets. And he’ll make his sister pay, too.”

There is a finality in Hannibal’s voice, carrying the impact of a capital D for the Decision he’s already made. Mason must hear it too because he begins to squeal again and tries to buck Will off. His eyes slide frantically from Will to Hannibal and back again.

Will slaps him across the face, almost absently, and when he raises his hand again in warning Mason falls more or less still. He’s crying, is the only thing, and that’s pathetic but not especially disruptive.

“I don’t have any plastic sheeting here and I don’t want to risk getting blood between the floorboards,” Will says. He can feel the rapid rise and fall of Mason’s chest underneath him, and way his body shudders when a new wave of gag-muffled sobbing hits him. “I could strangle him,” Will offers.

“Or you can, Hannibal, if you want to.”

Will tries to keep the desire from his voice. It is important to him that Hannibal does not feel pressured.

“No,” Hannibal says slowly, and Will knows that it is Margot on his mind, despite Will having told him very little about her, as well as the idea of the children Mason has hurt. “That would be too easy.”

“The basement’s still a good space,” Will suggests, “even without the equipment.”

Hannibal shakes his head. “I know a place we can take him.”

Mason is more than halfway towards choking to death on the gag when they open the trunk. Will reaches down and pulls the wad of cloth from his mouth, and when he does this Hannibal’s stray hair is left behind, the single strand tangled firmly around Mason’s uvula.

It invokes a faint scratching feeling in the back of Mason’s throat, but beneath everything else that sensation doesn’t so much as register.

That hair is the least of Mason’s worries. Will and Hannibal will be more than worried by it, when it is discovered later.

Now, Will tosses the gag in the corner of the trunk, no longer needing it. This place is so remote that no one will ever hear Mason scream, but he makes a mental note to burn the gag later.

Mason doesn’t scream, though - not right away. He lays on his back in the trunk and gasps, body desperate to make up for lost air now that the obstructing gag is gone.

“Go over there a ways,” Will asks Hannibal. "Just for a few minutes, and please don’t listen in. This is a matter of doctor patient confidentiality.”

When Hannibal has gone Will leans down into the trunk to speak with Mason.

“You know what I’d like to do?” Will asks him, pitching his voice so it won’t carry. “I’d like to stick you every place you stuck Margot with that damned pen knife, and see how long it takes you to come to pieces. She’s told me about every last scar, you know. I know where they all are, even the ones in places too intimate for her to want to show me.”

“Please don’t,” Mason whimpers, desperate eyes darting over Will’s face like he expects to find something there. Mercy, maybe, or something else he might exploit. “Please. I can’t take anymore.”

Will smiles warmly. “Don’t you worry, we aren’t going to do that.” He pauses, giving hope a little bit of time to kindle in Mason’s chest before stomping it out. “I can’t do that, because when they find your body it would make Margot look like a suspect. I don’t want her left in the lurch for the seven years it’ll take to have you declared dead if you go missing, either, so the body will need to be found.

“So instead, I’m going to let my boyfriend decide what he wants to do with you.

“Hannibal is more or less new at this all. But you know what, Mason? I think he’s going to be better at it than I ever could be. Sorry to be the barer of bad news, but I think that you are in for a rough night.”

Will raises his head and looks around for Hannibal. He sees him standing with his back to the car, beneath a tree some distance away, and when Will calls out his name Hannibal turns to face him.

There is something about the way that Hannibal carries himself as he walks back to Will, an incongruous mixture of pure mence and puppy dog eagerness, that ignites something in Will’s heart. The feeling is as bright and beautiful and dangerous as a flame, and Will feels himself warmed from the inside by it.

“You know,” he says, pitching his voice soft enough that only Mason will hear him, “I really do think that I might love him.”

Chapter 6

In the aftermath, Will looks at Hannibal as he looms over the body and he is struck by a profound sense of awe.

He could do something like that to me, Will thinks, knowing that it's a foolish thought - that Hannibal hadn't even when given the opportunity and a more than good enough reason to do so.

But the terror and excitement provoked by the thought combined with the sense of power that comes from understanding that he holds a heart such as Hannibal's in his hand are enough to make Will's limbs tingle and his head swim.

They move towards one another at the same time, and when Hannibal reaches out and grabs Will by his wrist to pull him against his chest in a crushing embrace, the bite of fear that comes from finding himself suddenly and almost painfully trapped in the cage of Hannibal's arms is not so great as to overpower Will's desire to be close to Hannibal and to allow Hannibal to express his own desire for closeness in the manner that is best for him.

It's an uncalculated and awkward expression of affection, rough and clingy and desperately *hungry* in its need, but Will bears it, though he feels as though he can barely breathe. One of Hannibal's hands move to the back of his head, cradling it, fingers twined through Will's hair, and some of the pressure relaxes, though now he finds the side of his face pressed against Hannibal's chest.

Will can hear Hannibal's heartbeat, strong and steady, and that even beat goes some distance towards calming the fluttering in his own chest. He clutches at Hannibal's back, wanting to find some way to pull him closer.

Hannibal smells strongly of blood - the very air around them is redolent with it - and when Hannibal pulls away from Will, something he does abruptly and with a stiffness that seems closely akin to embarrassment, Will's clothing and skin are streaked by the blood.

Hannibal steps away from Will and from the body, giving Will licence to take over from here, watching from the shadows as Will moves around with the powerful electronic lantern, fixing things the way he wants them and sweeping the scene for evidence. There's no objection when Will saws away a neat piece of meat and bone from the rear of the already open chest cavity.

Because Hannibal is watching when Will hooks his fingers inside the mouth, feeling along the backs of the teeth and shining the beam of a small but powerful flashlight into the mouth to search for stray fibers from the gag or anything else incriminating that might have caught between Mason's teeth, there will be no question later as to whether or not Will did a thorough job.

They will, at least, know with confidence that neither one of them is to blame for the slipup - that the mistake was simply a matter of unforeseeable and unpreventable bad luck.

“Rub down the surface of the eyes and under the lids as well,” Hannibal tells him in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice. “Bev’s working on figuring out a way to dust the corneas for fingerprints.”

Neither of them had touched Mason’s eyes, but another degree of caution is never a bad idea, so Will does as asked.

“This doesn’t feel the way I expected it to feel,” Hannibal says, looking down at his hands folded on the table in front of him. There had been blood under his nails but it’s gone now. Will gave him a dentist pick and a bar of lava soap and Hannibal scrubbed his skin nearly raw to make sure his hands were entirely clean. He imagines he can still smell the coppery scent of blood on his skin, but probably that is coming from the meat Will is cooking.

“How did you expect it to be?” Will asks. His hair is fluffy and soft-looking, just dry from the long shower, and Hannibal watches the way it moves as he busies himself in front of the stove.

Two separate skillets sizzle on the stovetop. There’s an excellent ribeye cooking in the one on the left, and what might easily have been mistaken for pork chops in the other.

“I’m not sure,” Hannibal admits. “Different from this though.”

Will flips the meat in the second pan with a fork and then moves to the same with the steak.

“Don’t use that on mine,” Hannibal says. “Keep the utensils separate.” The fork pauses poised above the steak. Then Will sits it down graciously and takes a second fork from the drawer to turn the ribeye. Hannibal can’t quite tell if Will was trying to get away with something or not, but is too distracted to give it much thought.

Hannibal says, “I suppose that’s it - I was afraid that I’d feel more different than I do. Like it would change me in some fundamental way.

“But I just feel like myself. And I feel calm. Is that unusual?”

Will turns from the stove long enough to hold his own hand up so Hannibal can see how steady it is.

“It’s different every time,” Will says, turning his back on Hannibal again. “A lot of it depends on the victim - who they are and how they respond. Mason was an easy target. The type of feelings someone like Mason evokes are entirely straightforward and uncomplicated.”

“Don’t talk about this like you expect it to be a regular thing.”

Will is plating the food, but he pauses long enough to shrug with one shoulder. He sets Hannibal’s steak on the table in front of him and then returns to the counter for his own plate. The sides come next.

“Tomato salad with red onion, dill and feta cheese,” Will says, “and roasted sweet potatoes with a cilantro pesto. Simpler than I’d like, given the occasion, but it’s late and since I’m sure that you’ve worked up an appetite I didn’t want to keep you waiting.”

Hannibal might have scoffed at this any other time, the pretense of pretending this is anything other than a feast, but tonight he accepts it.

Harder to accept what’s on Will’s plate, but Hannibal is trying.

He does not want to shy away from anything tonight. Holding his own knife and fork poised above the steak, he waits.

Will angles his eyes up at Hannibal and smiles with soft contentment as he takes the first bite, and Hannibal knows that he is not being deliberately provocative. Entirely the opposite; he’s trying to make this as easy on Hannibal as it can be. Hannibal appreciates that.

“How did you expect me to feel?” he asks Will.

Will puts down his fork and wipes his mouth with a napkin before he answers.

“I’m not exactly sure myself.” Will pauses, takes an anxious swallow of water from his glass. Hannibal angles his head, trying to get Will to meet his eyes, but as hard as he tries Will can’t quite manage it. His eyes flick up to meet Hannibal’s briefly then drop again. “I thought - worried - that you might feel that you had been tricked or manipulated into this, that I had corrupted you… and that made me afraid that you might hate me afterwards.”

He doesn’t voice the question but it’s plain on his face. *Do you?*

“I feared the same thing,” Hannibal tells him. “I thought, ‘Will has killed so many people, but if I do something wrong with this… if I am violent in some specific way that frightens or offends him or if that violence exceeds whatever boundaries he might have set for himself…”

It is difficult for him but Hannibal holds the smile on his face, open and exposed, until Will raises his eyes, and when he does Hannibal sees his own smile reproduced on Will’s face, and the wonderment and devotion there is nearly enough to provoke weeping. He thinks, *I never knew that I could love someone like this.*

“But I didn’t scare you away,” Hannibal says. “You liked it.”

“Yes,” Will breathes, and there is awe in his voice. “Yes.”

Chapter 7

It's true that Will has been entertaining certain aspiration for the conclusion of this evening. He is, in fact, painfully eager.

But by the time Will leads Hannibal up the stairs it's evident that he needs to adjust his expectations. Hannibal follows Will into his room willingly, but he's crashing; the effects of rather too much wine at dinner mixing with the excitement and heavy work of their long evening and the pressure of weeks of overwork on the Red Dragon case all descending on him at once.

Will understands. He doesn't resent it.

It's like this for him sometimes, too. In the wake of killing it is as though he has put down a tremendous burden, and he is free and relaxed in his own body. Sleep comes easily then.

So it doesn't bother Will that it's all he can do to keep Hannibal upright long enough to change into the set of pajamas that Will bought for him weeks ago, in hopeful anticipation of a night like this, when Hannibal would stay in his home as his guest rather than a prisoner.

"Second time you've dressed me today," Hannibal observes, peeling off the clothing that Will had given him to replace the outfit bloodied by his encounter with Mason.

That outfit had gone into the furnace hours ago, along with everything that Will had been wearing at the scene and the gag from the trunk.

After that, Will had taken the plastic trunk liner out and scrubbed it down before putting it back in place. No one had ever had case to ask him about that liner, but he has always planned to tell anyone who might do so that it was there to protect the Fury's original interior.

It is after all, essentially the truth.

Hannibal sits in his boxers on the edge of the bed and strokes the fabric of the flannel pajamas. "Where did you find anything this soft?" he wonders, and then yawns hugely.

"I thought you would like them." Will favors silk night clothes himself, and the pair that he's pulling on now are dyed a dark just short of true black.

Hannibal stands up long enough to slide into the flannel pajama bottoms, and from the other side of the bed Will watches the way the muscles in his back flex when Hannibal bends over.

Sitting back down on the bed, Hannibal shrugs on the pajama top and begins to button it. Will's fingers falter in their work of buttoning his top when he sees how good the cream and golden stripes look against Hannibal's skin.

Will motions for Hannibal to stand up again so he can turn down the quilt.

Hannibal does so, then settles back onto the bed. “I don’t know why I’m so tired,” he says, apologetic but not unhappy about it.

“You haven’t been resting well since we got back from our trip,” Will says, and is answered with another yawn. To Will, Hannibal looks like a drowsy lion, sharp-toothed but somehow cozy too. Something so warm and soft that it would be a delight to rest your head on his powerful chest, despite - or even because of - the power in those fangs.

“This is the second evening I’ve had to myself since we got back,” Hannibal says. Will knows that the other was spent packing up and moving the equipment in his basement to a storage unit, and he knows too that the trip to Louisiana didn’t exactly constitute a relaxing vacation.

"You're worn out," Will says, and Hannibal nods. "There’s more to it than that, though. You sleep better when I’m nearby, don’t you?”

“I suppose I do,” Hannibal says, and settles back on the pillows with a sigh.

Will lays down beside him, propping himself up on one elbow improve his vantage as he watches Hannibal. “You feel safe when I’m close.”

Hannibal turns on his side to face Will. He seems somehow more vulnerable in that position. “I want to be closer to you,” he says, his earnestness more naked than ever in his exhaustion. “I want to hold you. Let me, Will. Please.”

“I will, Hannibal. You can.”

But the damned shakes are back, before Hannibal has even moved to touch him. Will doesn’t understand it. He'd really believed that he had this thing, whatever it is, beaten. Now that it’s happening again Will wants to cry with frustration. He wants to hurt himself, too - torture his own body into submission if that that’s what it takes to force himself into not hurting Hannibal like this anymore.

“I don’t want for you to be afraid of me,” Hannibal says, and Will sees that his eyes are glassy with unshed tears.

“I’m not.”

“Liar.”

“You’re everything I want, Hannibal,” Will says, because bald honesty seems to be his only option. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me that this keeps happening.”

He pauses, and inside of his head he imagines the way that an oyster must feel when the blade slips between its shells and begins to pry it open. The sharp, ripping pain and the terror of exposure; that’s what this feels like for him, though Will is not sure who holds the knife - himself or Hannibal. “There’s a lot that’s wrong with me, Hannibal. Whatever this is, it’s something that’s wrong with me - not you.”

Will searches Hannibal's face to see if he's been believed, but it's hard to say. Despite the exhaustion and drink, nothing shows on Hannibal's face that he didn't give leave to be there.

"What can I do to help you, that I'm not already doing?" Hannibal asks at last.

It's easier to touch than be touched, and when Will reaches out to cup the side of Hannibal's face he leans into that touch. Will's hand shakes only a little at that.

"I wish I knew," Will says. "But this is good enough, isn't it, for right now?"

There's fear in his voice when he says this, but Hannibal's smile is tremendously reassuring.

After a very short time, they both sleep.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

ByJoveWhatASpend gets a considerable amount of credit for inspiring this one. <333

Curled on his side like a fetus, legs drawn up against his belly and arms folded across his chest, Will lays naked in Hannibal's arms.

The space around Will is black darkness but this is no barrier to his seeing the way the knife gleams when he draws it, somehow, from his own unwounded navel.

Will's hands are his own, and he feels the familiar grain of the wooden handle under his fingers as he turns the hunting knife over in his palms, but he does not control the movements of those hands, and it is a shock to him when they drive the blade hilt-deep into Hannibal's belly and wrench the knife upwards towards his sternum.

Hot blood and things unidentifiable flow out of Hannibal in a flood, and Hannibal comes awake, small frantic sounds coming out of his throat as his arms thrash and legs kick to be free of the blankets and his eyes dart about in the darkness, and Will understands that Hannibal cannot see what's happening - that the predator eyes which cut through the blackness are Will's special gift alone.

Then it is as though there are two of him, both moving within the same skin. One version of Will delights in fighting with Hannibal as he dies, clutching his wrists and feeling the strength leaking out of those powerful arms that might so easily have hurt him again. That Will studies Hannibal's eyes as his struggles grow more feeble, watching avidly as the shocked pain and frightened confusion cycle through Hannibal's wide eyes to be replaced by a new understanding - one which brings with it a different kind of agony, that of love rejected and trusted betrayed, and the pleasure Will derives from that understanding is entirely unmentionable.

But Will's other self struggles to convince Hannibal to lay still so he can help him. He begs for forgiveness and pleads his own confusion and fear while he tries to press his hands over the gaping wound in Hannibal's center, but is knocked away again and again by Hannibal, though every time the blow comes more slowly and with less power.

The two selves break apart in fragments and blur back together, and the blood is everywhere, drenching Will. There's more blood than ten men could possibly hold and yet it keeps coming, and Will can see in Hannibal's eyes that he is dying but still he struggles against Will, and -

And Will wakes himself screaming.

He looks for Hannibal in the bed beside him but he is not there. Panic surging, Will struggles in the tangle of blankets, and for a long dizzy moment the red silk is blood and he is drowning in it.

Then Hannibal says his name and Will jerks his head toward the sound.

Hannibal stands in the bathroom doorway, a razor in his hand and specks of shaving lather still on his face. A thin line of blood mars the angle of his jaw, and Will realizes that this is his fault - that his screaming must have startled Hannibal while he was shaving, which is an astonishing thing because he has never before seen the man so much as flinch - and he is reminded again of the sight of Hannibal's opened belly and the way the accusing light in Hannibal's eyes faded into empty blankness while Will stammered for forgiveness and struggled uselessly to hold back the tide that was pouring out of him.

Something hard in Will's chest breaks apart into jagged pieces, and he is crying. He is *sobbing* in a way that he has not since he was a very small and very frightened child, and like a child he is holding his arms out to Hannibal, begging him to come closer.

Hannibal hesitates in the doorway for just an instant, mystification holding him frozen, and then he moves forward.

Will curls his arms around Hannibal's neck and clings, his face buried against Hannibal's skin at the junction of his neck and shoulder, and Hannibal is sensitive of how close Will's mouth is to his throat.

He wraps his own arms around Will and lifts him, then pivots to sit on the bed, drawing Will into his lap. They stay there like that for a long time, Hannibal stroking Will's hair while the sobs rip through him.

When Will is a little calmer, Hannibal asks, "What did you dream of?" and Will, his forehead still pressed against Hannibal's shoulder, shakes his head violently, refusing to answer.

Hannibal puts a hand under Will's chin and lifts his head until Will's eyes meet his own. The guilt and shame in those eyes are as blatant as the tears that have left them so raw. "Was it me?" Hannibal asks softly.

He understood, almost immediately, that it had been.

Will draws in a deep, shuddering breath and cuts his eyes away from Hannibal before confessing. "I gutted you," he says shakily, and flinches as though expecting a blow.

Hannibal's heart leaps, joyous. He squeezes Will more tightly against him, then releases him so he can look down into Will's upturned, baffled face.

"You must really care for me," Hannibal tells Will, "if the idea of hurting me upsets you that much."

“You’re so goddamned *weird*,” Will breathes, his eyes wide with wonderment and threatening to overflow with tears again.

Hannibal only smiles, basking in the sight of Will's tangled hair and his wet, red-eyed and snot-streaked face. He draws Will close again to rain kisses down on the crown on his head, in among the curls.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

CW for brief but disturbing reference to canonical rape in the third to last paragraph.

Hannibal had been anxious about leaving Will alone to go to work, but once the storm passed Will pulled himself together and put on the best performance he could manage. It was, he thinks, a damned good act, even if it didn't really convince Hannibal.

"I'm just fine," he told Hannibal half a dozen times, and if Hannibal didn't really believe that he was at least convinced that there would be no forcing Will to admit that he wasn't.

Will is, of course, not at all fine. He is afraid of strangling Hannibal, of needing too much, of being weak and of Hannibal seeing and understanding that weakness and rejecting him for it.

It should be no challenge for him to stand on his own feet - he's been doing it alone for nearly his whole life, but he feels like he's fraying around the edges. He feels terribly fragile.

Usually, a feeling like that would send him looking for a target, but Will knows that he needs to cut back. He's been running way too hot as of late, and that worries him - and not only because it's an invitation to be noticed.

It's barely September, and he's already taken five this year, not counting Mason.

It's unprecedented. In the past, he's never taken more than three in the course of a single year. Once, there'd been a stretch of nearly four good years in his late twenties when he hadn't felt the need to kill anyone at all.

The fear of losing Hannibal is still large in him when the security system chimes to alert Will to the presence of a car in the drive, and though it's much too early in the day for it to be Hannibal, Will senses nonetheless that it is.

He checks himself in the mirror before going to the door. There's no going back from what Hannibal saw this morning, but Will is hopeful at least that he can keep him from knowing the way the tears have pursued him through the day, sneaking up on him in surprising moments and taking him unawares.

It's funny, Will thinks absently, how easily and how entirely without shame Hannibal cries. No one would expect that, looking at him. Will has always been disgusted by his own tears.

Now he see that his eyes are red, the skin under them puffy, but it's too late to do anything about it.

What is he doing home so early? Will wonders, as he heads down the hall to meet Hannibal at the door, trying by long habit to substitute curiosity or annoyance or any other emotion for the distress he's feeling.

When he sees that Hannibal has Beth with him, following beside him on a leash, the fear spikes.

He is giving her back because he doesn't want either of you anymore, the enemy inside of him insists, and it is hard to dismiss that voice when he sees the uneasy way Hannibal dodges meeting his eyes when they greet each other at the door.

Hannibal trails behind as they walk to the kitchen, leaving an unnatural amount of space between two of them.

Will tries to be proactive. He folds his hands together on the table and says, "You're here to tell me something that you know I'm not going to like hearing."

Hannibal's smile is brief and sardonic. *How did you guess?* that smile says, well aware of how transparent he is.

But when he speaks Hannibal ops for obscuration. "It's nothing that you need to feel upset about," he says, and Will feels a twist of anger at the open attempt to direct his emotions. "I need you to watch Beth for a while. It shouldn't be more than five days, and might actually be considerably less, if we're lucky."

He pauses, giving Will a chance to interject a question. When Will remains silent, Hannibal continues, "Jack has an idea - a good one, I think - to bait the Dragon."

"What bait?" Will asks. He already knows, of course.

"Me."

"No."

Hannibal's nostrils flare as he blows air out his nose. "You aren't in charge of this, Will," he says, almost regretfully.

"I'm aware. What I'd like to know is if you were given any say in the matter, or did Jack Crawford simply inform you that he was going to leave you dangling out on the hook?"

"I'll be safe."

"Oh bullshit." There is in Will a desire to beg. "You *know* that's bullshit, Hannibal."

"I'll be 80% safe. Jack's got me covered.

"And I do, I hope you will concede, know how to take care of myself," he adds, trying for irony.

It falls short, and he gives it up in favor of earnestness. “Time’s flying, Will. If we don’t get him soon it’s going to be another family, and I don’t want to have to look at a new pair of dead children.”

"I care more about you than I do the Dragon’s next set of victims, Hannibal, and it worries me that it seems like I'm the only one who does. Those people are strangers.” When Hannibal tries to interject, Will raises his voice, steamrolling him.

“I know it’s not what you want to hear, Hannibal - I can see how disgusted you are with me and I’m sorry for making you feel that way, but you let me finish. Nothing that you have done wrong - no perceived fault of thought or deed - justifies you throwing your life away to play at being Jack Crawford’s pawn.

“You owe yourself better than that.”

It is now, when Will needs so badly for Hannibal to believe his evaluation of his worth that Will truly regrets Hannibal’s having learned the truth of him. When he still believed that Will was a good person Hannibal had valued Will’s assessments of himself, even if he hadn’t been entirely willing to accept them. Now, though, it’s easy for him to dismiss Will as having a faulty standard of measurement.

Will sees that happening now.

“We’re running the stakeout for five days and nights,” he says, as though Will hadn’t spoken. “Will you keep Beth here or would you rather I find a kennel? I can’t have her at home.”

“Because the Dragon kills pets.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t want him to know you have a dog because he might kill it.”

“Yeah, Will.”

“But you’re safe. This plan is too chancy to risk an animal getting hurt but it’s good enough for you to put your own throat on the line. You don’t see how that might be a problem? You don’t perceive yourself as being used?”

“The plan works better if she isn’t there. A dog would complicate things.

“I’m not going to do anything stupid." Hannibal pauses, then he says, "Listen, I love you.”

Will doesn’t answer. His heart is franic and too large for his chest.

Beth is a sensitive animal.

She can feel the way Will’s anxiety bleeds into the air and fills the house. When he paces she whines, but if he sits still for too long - if he gets lost in his fears and frustrations - she comes

to him and mouth's his hand, whimpering until he concedes to pet her.

The article appears on the Tattle Crime website within an hour of Hannibal leaving, and when he sees it he loses all thought of the dog.

Beth has never in her life been struck, and rarely has a human being ever so much as raised their voice at her, but the waves of rage and sick fear radiating off of Will send her sinking up the stairs to hide under his bed.

The article is a dozen paragraphs carefully calculated to provoke foolish, murderous rage in the Dragon, all crafted in Freddie Lounds' usual eye-grabbing, hyperbolic style.

Hannibal is quoted as referring to the Dragon as the "Tooth Fairy" half a dozen times. He mocks the letter that the Dragon sent him and the aspirations expressed in it. The suggestion that the Dragon may be sexually attracted to Hannibal in particular and men in general remains an vague and ugly subtext, but the article is more straightforward in its argument that he is sexually incompetent - too cowardly to approach a living woman and too repulsive to obtain consent. Nearly a quarter of the article is spent on Hannibal speculating on the possibility that he is somehow deformed or disfigured.

As base and nasty as the article is, it's the pictures that get under Will's skin.

They show Hannibal in front of his home. The isolation of the place, and of Hannibal himself, is stressed. One picture takes in the open fields behind and to the left of the house and the woods to the right, offering multiple possibilities to approach the place unseen under cover of darkness.

The house is a honey pot and Hannibal the treat inside. Hannibal has said that he will be under 24-hour surveillance, but Will can see plenty of ways to work around any security that might be placed outside of the house, and breaking and entering has never been his specialization. The Dragon will be much better at that approach.

In none of the pictures does Hannibal appear in frame with another human being. He looks as vulnerable as a man his size can look. He is utterly by himself. It feels like a cruel joke at Hannibal's expense, a mocking testament to a lonely existence.

Will can barely stomach it.

In his mind's eye, Will sees Hannibal with his throat cut, chunks of broken glass where his eyes ought to be. He sees the snaggle-toothed bite marks on Hannibal's blue-white bloodless skin, dozens of them.

It is his understanding that it was not completely clear, in the postmortems, if the Leeds and Jacobi women had been entirely dead before the rapes began.

Will takes his keys from the counter and begins to head for the door, but then he forces himself to sit back down and wait for night fall.

When it's full dark, he points his car away from the city and drives.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the dark bedroom, Hannibal senses the shape looming in front of him.

The intruder was stealthy. None of the hallway floorboards creaked at his approach. He'd taken his time opening the bedroom door, moving with such focused patience that it took almost fifteen minutes for him to turn the doorknob, open the door wide enough to slip in through, and then to guide the door home again so it wouldn't creak when he released the knob.

Then the barefeet, drifting across the carpet as silently as cat's paws, bring him to the bedside.

He is waiting there now, breathing through his nose softly and nearly without sound.

If Hannibal had not been awake and waiting, he probably have no idea that he isn't alone.

There is a gun under the blanket with Hannibal. His fingers brush the mental, warm from his own body heat, as he reaches from under the covers and switches on the bedside lamp.

Will crouches eye-level to him beside the bed, his smile boyish.

Hannibal takes the gun from under the blankets and sits it carefully on the bedside table, then he rolls onto his back and drapes a hand over his forehead, rubbing his temples.

"I'm fairly sure that I should be absolutely livid right now," he tells Will, "but I'm glad to see you." He throws his hands back on the pillows. "I am the only one who saw you, I hope?"

Will crawls into the bed with him, and Hannibal feels Will's head settle on his chest. His hand spreads like a starfish just above Hannibal's navel.

"I told you this plan was shit," Will says. "They don't have enough eyes on the house. If I were the Dragon, you'd probably be dead right now."

"If you were the Dragon, I'd have shot you in the doorway. I knew it was you before you even opened the door."

Will lifts his head to look at Hannibal. "How?"

"Your aftershave," Hannibal says, trying to be gentle but knowing that there is nonetheless an offend note in his voice. "You know, Will, more expensive isn't necessarily always the same thing as better."

Will snorts, insulted, then lays his head back down on Hannibal's chest. Hannibal's own hand finds the back of Will's head, and he works his fingers through the curls carefully. He has

found that if he keeps his hand moving Will has a much easier time accepting his touch.

Will is luxuriating in that touch now.

He shifts on the mattress, drawing himself closer to Hannibal with a wiggle, and nuzzles his face against Hannibal's chest. The thumb of the hand that is spread open on Hannibal's belly moves in time with the movements of Hannibal's hand in Will's hair, stroking Hannibal through the cloth of his nightshirt.

Hannibal is starting to feel drowsy when Will tells him, "I like listening to your heart. My own goes the same pace when I can hear yours."

That sounds implausible to Hannibal, and he spreads his own hand across Will's chest. "You're right," he says after a long pause, and is lost in a sense of wonderment.

Then Hannibal yawns, hugely.

"We really can't do this now or I'm going to fall asleep."

Will rolls over to let Hannibal up but does not himself rise. He sits on the edge of the bed, hands folded in his lap, hunched with exhaustion.

"Alright?" Will asks.

"Today was hell," Hannibal says. "Meeting with Freddie Lounds was hell."

"What happened?"

"Her usual, more or less," Hannibal says. "But it's harder to deal with face to face, you know? I felt like things were getting better - like I was learning how to pass for a human being - then I spent the whole day with her watching me out of the corner of her eye like I'm a vicious animal and she knows better than to turn her back to me even though she's too tough to actually be cowed by my presence. It's not enough for her to tell everyone what a monster I am, she wants me to an object in a story she tells about herself about how she isn't frightened of monsters."

"You're not a monster, Hannibal."

Hannibal huffs; he doesn't believe Will but he doesn't want to argue the point, either. "I wanted to strangle her."

"Who doesn't? But better not," Will says, and Hannibal feels his hand slide under the hem of his shirt and begin to rub the small of his back. "She's a high profile person, and she's already accused you in print of threatening to kill her. Did any of that actually happen, by the way?"

"Not exactly," Hannibal says, knowing that Will can feel the tension spike in his muscles.

"Well, but?"

“But I told her that if she really believes that I am a dangerous psychopath then maybe she should reconsider the wisdom of deliberately provoking me.” He pauses. “But I was ruder in how I phrased it.”

Will lets out a low whistle, impressed. “That woman has a lot more in common with the average psychopath than you do,” he says. “And she knows that and it doesn’t bother her. She’s poking you where she thinks you’re vulnerable to see if she can get a reaction, because then she has a story. And that bullshit sells, Hannibal. It sells like you wouldn’t believe.”

“It’s hard to argue that she’s wrong about me, at least in that regard,” Hannibal says, and when Will tries to do just that he waves a hand for quiet. “That’s not what really got under my skin,” he goes on. “I’m used to being the object of that type of speculation.

“But she assumes that I’m straight, and she kept trying to use that as a club against me. She didn’t like what I was saying in the interview - which is fine, I don’t care for it either - but she kept cutting in to say, ‘I’m not going to run this. How can I look my wife in the eyes if I run this?’”

A petty yet proud part of Hannibal - the part that always assumed that he would be alone and that worries that he might still end up that way again, that is frightened especially of how much he is risking to work this case, both in terms of the attention it is drawing towards himself and the strain that it has placed on the new relationship - wanted to throw “boyfriend” and “Will” around the same way that Freddie used “wife” and “Wendy,” like bombs to hurl at an enemy or self-righteous armor to guard against accusations of questionable motives.

“I wanted to tell her that this affects me just as much as it does her, if not moreso, and that I don’t take any pleasure in exploiting homophobia - to whatever degree it may or may not be internalized - to bait the Dragon, but I’m not going to discard any tool that might help us catch him just so Freddie Lounds can pretend that she suddenly has discovered scruples. Especially when Tattle Crime was the outlet that original popularized the ‘Tooth Fairy’ moniker in the first place, as if the subtext isn't absolutely blatant.”

“What was she really after?” Will asks. He’s sitting up now, hands still beneath Hannibal rucked up night shirt as he kneads at the tenseness in Hannibal’s shoulders.

“Another interview - this one on her terms completely. If we get the Dragon before he strikes again I talk to her about how we did that.”

“And if he isn’t caught before that you also give her an interview, except that you eat just as much crow as she wants to feed you and she runs a story that highlights exactly why it’s all your fault, right?”

“I want to look at the file again,” Hannibal says, and pulls away from Will’s touch to pad over to the desk to retrieve it, along with his laptop. He comes back to bed and opens the big file, spreading the papers and photos out around himself. Will peers down from over his shoulder, curious.

Hannibal has tried to keep this case and Will as separate from one another as possible. He wants to form no associations between the Dragon's killings and what Will has done and what he and Hannibal have done - and will do, he suspects - together. Hannibal understands the Dragon's violence as both uniquely contemptible in its own right and deeply offensive to his personal sensitivities, but Will is not righteous as he would like to believe himself to be and Hannibal knows his own instincts are even less so. The line between the Dragon and themselves is stark but attempting to understand exactly where it ought to lie is uncomfortable.

But he is growing desperate, and he walks Will through the details of the case in the hopes that explaining the thing to a new listener will reveal some facet that he has himself so far overlooked. And too, he recognizes that Will possesses a unique insight into people and their motivations, and is especially well versed in understanding violence.

Hours into the conversation, though, nothing new has surfaced, and though Will has stopped him to ask many questions none of them shine light on any angle that Hannibal hasn't already carefully explored.

"I want to see the families more clearly," Will says, finally. "Do we understand why he's picking them?"

Hannibal hands him two sheaths of personal photographs - birthdays, vacations, family portraits. The Jacobi girl, dressed for a ballet recital. A new puppy, a red bow around it neck, cuddled in the children's arms as they sit under the Christmas tree, surrounded by an embarrassment of riches in the form of unopened, brightly wrapped presents. Here are the Leeds in an older photo, welcoming home the new baby, big brothers beaming with childish pride, Charles Leeds in the back, arms wrapped around his family warmly.

"I have video too," Hannibal says, switching on his laptop. "There might be an element of class resentment involved," he says, waiting for the machine to wake up. "Both were wealthy families that were given to athletic hobbies that advertised that wealth. The Jacobis' have a summer house on lake Michigan - jet skis, a pontoon boat, water sports. It was skiing for the Leeds. They had taken six holidays to various resorts in the five years leading up to the killings. Nice cars, workshops in the garage or the tool shed for both men, though neither seemed to do more than tinker."

"I wouldn't call them wealthy," Will says. "They were rich enough to know that they were rich but vulnerable enough to worry that they might somehow lose it. A lot of this anxious, performative spending. That's different from wealthy."

Hannibal shrugs. He is sure that the distinction is real - perhaps even relevant to the case - but his own memories of a childhood spent grubbing for the crumbs of crumbs to keep himself and the other children around him fed and clothed makes it difficult for him to respect it.

"It's possible," he allows, "that the question of class resentment is projection on my part. He may be hunting in his own class. Almost universally serial killers target people in or below their own economic bracket.

“Here’s the first video,” Hannibal adds, and positions the laptop so Will can see it. It’s the one of the Leeds’ celebrating their arrival at the new house. He watches Will watch it, his face are reflected on the screen, transparent and ghostly, on top of the film. The voices of the Leeds are small but clear in the laptop’s speakers.

Will’s eyes fix on Charles Leeds whenever he is in frame, watching him intently, his head cocked slightly to the side. Hannibal knows what Will is thinking about; there’s little in Leeds’ blandly average face to suggest that he is a man capable of finding the will to fight his own killer while his life’s blood jetted from his throat.

“Are you attracted to him?” Hannibal asks, curious. He feels only very slightly jealous.

Will glances sideways from the screen long enough to offer him a soft smile. “I think it would be closer to the truth to say that I’m envious of his courage,” he admits. Then he asks, “Did either of the Leeds have a fancy computer setup for this type of film editing work?”

“The footage was taken on a digital camera. It’s easy to slice it together the way you want, there’s programs that don’t take a lot of processing power.”

Will shrugs and clicks through to another video. It’s one of the Jacobis’ this time, the birthday celebration.
“The families play into it, but the women are the important thing.”

“That’s the working assumption. See how similar they look?”

“Oedipal.”

“Doubtless.”

Will taps the screen with the back of a finger. “This is what I meant by them being anxiously rich. This looks like an audition tape for a family of the year contest. The Leeds video is the same way. I’ve had patients that get into this stuff, and there are people in the dog show circuit who have similar interests. It’s easy to get fixated when you are trying to maintain an illusion of the perfect upper-middle class lifestyle. That want validation - to be seen.”

He pauses. “You’re sure these aren’t professionally edited? The audio is really clear. I’ve seen videos taken at dog shows, two thousand dollar camera and the background chatter is still a jumble of noise -”

Hannibal isn’t listening. The phrase ‘audition tape’ hooks in his brain.

“Stop talking,” Hannibal says, and Will falls silently instantly. Hannibal feels his eyes watching him, avid and anxiously expectant.

“It’s probably nothing…” Hannibal says, but an instant later he snatches up his cellphone, calling whoever is at the desk in the evidence room.

Things don't fall into place instantly.

Hannibal asks the techs to go through the Leeds' and Jacobi's receipts, paper and electronic, to dig through their email accounts for any sign that copies of the films had been sent in for a contest or collection or posted online. "He saw these videos somehow," Hannibal tells the woman on the other end of the line, and knows it for a fact as he says it.

"He saw the videos," Hannibal says again to Will, when he hangs up to let the techs do their work. "Everything he needed to know is in those videos - the layout of the houses, what equipment he needed to break in..."

"The shape of their lives. How the women looked when they smile," Will adds thoughtfully. He is busy on Hannibal's computer. After a few minutes he looks up and says, "The Jacobi's videos are posted publicly on Youtube - just showing off. But the Leeds' don't seem to be."

It takes nearly an hour for the evidence room to call back with them same information and so much more. Later, Hannibal will think that if the Dragon had struck at them while they were waiting for the return call he might just have gotten the drop on them, a distracted as they both were.

There's nothing to indicate that the Leeds' shared the film file with anyone but family and friends, the tech tells Hannibal, though the Jacobi's posted theirs on several different internet platforms. But they'd found digital receipts that indicated that both families sent rough versions of their films to the same private company to be professionally edited.

"Gateway Film Editing, St. Louis." the voice on the line says. "That's relevant, isn't it?" The woman is younger than Bev, not quite as outwardly self-confident, but Hannibal hears the same triumph that comes into Bev's voice when she finds the piece of evidence that she knows will seal the case.

You're so sly, but so am I, Hannibal thinks, remembering with fond admiration the way Bev repeats the rhyme to herself when focusing in on a particularly promising clue. Less than two weeks from now, Beverly Katz will put together all the pieces necessary to shatter Hannibal's life to pieces, and when that happens his sense of appreciation at how neatly his friend does the job will be such that he will hardly have it in him to feel angry with her.

"I think it might be," Hannibal tells the tech. Then he hangs up to call Jack.

Things move very quickly after that.

The stakeout is not called off completely, but it is a given that Hannibal will not remain at home waiting for the Dragon's call. They ignore the confusion and outrage of the agents on watch when Will emerges from the house along with Hannibal.

Hannibal insists that Will come with him to St. Louis, and they stop by Will's house only long enough for him to pack a small bag and walk the dog. The pet sitter, who he contacted before leaving for Hannibal's, will be there in the morning.

By the time their plane lands in St. Louis, two important things have happened.

Firstly, the Dragon has almost certainly been identified as Francis Dolarhyde, and the agents sent to his home to apprehend him have arrived to find the house engulfed in flames. His girlfriend, a blind woman named Reba McClane, tells a terrifying story of his suicide, and though it will be hours still until the embers have cooled enough for the blackened corpse to be retrieved no one doubts her account.

And the body of Mason Verger has been discovered.

Chapter End Notes

This was a big one, wasn't it? XD

Drew in Freddie's novel-canon wife here, because I love her.

whispers we all know Dolarhyde isn't really dead...

Chapter 11

When Will referred to their destination as “Muskrat Farm,” Hannibal pictured something very different from the place that they have come to. It’s a modern castle, complete with towers, a red brick monument to excess trimmed in stark white.

The smell of pigs is strong here, even in the entry hall, where the doorman has instructed the two of them to wait.

The click of high-heels echos in the cavernous space, and when Will turns towards the sound Hannibal does so too.

“Margot,” Will says, and his voice drips with mournful sympathy.

When Will hurries forward to meet her, Hannibal hangs back. Will draws the woman into a warm hug, and it seems to Hannibal that a long time passes before they come apart again. “How are you?” Will says, inclining his head so he can look down at Margot’s face as they walk side by side, back toward Hannibal.

Her reply is inaudible.

“Terrible shock, a tragedy,” Will is saying to her, as they draw closer.

Will moves to Hannibal’s side.

“This is my boyfriend,” Will tells her. “Hannibal.”

It is the first time that Will has introduced him to anyone as such, and it provokes in Hannibal a giddy feeling despite the circumstances of this meeting.

Margot’s handshake does something to draw him back to earth. It is surprisingly powerful.

The way that sound echoes and reverberates in the vast open spaces of the mansion reminds Hannibal strikingly of his old home in the castle-turned-orphanage, but that is the only thing this place has in common with where he grew up. Never has Hannibal seen such an endless procession of vulgar displays of wealth.

Will spends money easily, often on things that seem to Hannibal to be unnecessarily extravagant or self-indulgent, but he at least uses the things that he buys. The castle (he can think of it on no other terms), so incongruously located in midwestern livestock country, is like a graveyard for overwrought furnishings and lavish bobbles, room after room of space empty of everything but their ostentatious trappings.

The suite of rooms that Margot leads them into at least looks lived-in, and Hannibal feels almost as though he can breathe in the space.

They follow Margot into an open, sunny room, and it has been so many years since he has seen a nursery - and never one so well-appointed - that for a second Hannibal doesn't recognize it as such.

The boy is crouched over a jumble of hot wheel cars, busily sorting them into a long line by color and shape. He is intent on this task but when Margot says, "Thomas," he looks up. Then he grins.

"Sunshine," Will says, and Hannibal sees Will's face crack open to let the joy spill out when the boy runs to him. Will crouches and scoops him up into his arms.

Margot has broken away to speak privately with nanny, and so it's Will who tells Hannibal, "This is Margot's son, Thomas."

The boy has sensitive eyes, very large, and dark curly hair. When the two of them grin at one another, the resemblance is unmistakable.

Though they have already discussed the boy, a dozen new questions occur to Hannibal now, but what he asks first is, "Did Mason know?"

"Oblivious," Will says. He gives the word a sing-song rhythm and bounces Thomas in time with it.

"Tell him how old you are, sunshine," Will adds, and the boy wiggles shyly in his arms before holding up three fingers for Hannibal to see. He giggles then, and presses his face against Will, hiding shyly.

"Margot," Will told Hannibal on the drive out to the farm, "knows me better than anyone in this world, except for you.

"We've never spoken of anything specific, understand. I've never given her any names she could trace or solid facts that she might turn over the police, and I've never confessed to desiring or engaging in violence that surpasses what she's admitted to herself, and the only person we have ever actively discussed killing is Mason. But I think she knows and that she has admitted to that knowledge to herself. She has that particular kind of insight and she's had a lot of time to figure me out."

Will was braced to defuse jealousy when he told Hannibal about the boy, but Hannibal accepted the story with a quiet thoughtfulness.

"Are you in love with her?" he asked Will, and Will wondered if Hannibal understood how uniquely complicated the question was for him.

"I think I love all my patients, at least a little," he answered, mentally adding that to the list of things that he has never spoken out loud to anyone except Hannibal. Will could fake professional objectivity well enough, at least when he needed to, but the truth is that the dividing line between himself and his patients is often blurry. In a fundamental way, their

fears and tragedies and victories are his own, and when he has helped one of them to accept themselves it becomes so much easier for him to be at peace with himself too, even absent the aide of taking the occasional life. They are all a part of him, perhaps the part of himself that he loves best.

“And Hannibal," Will went on, "she’s a very dear friend. I feel closer to her than I ever was to my own blood. But am I in love with her, the way that I am in love with you? No.”

It was the first time that he’d told Hannibal that he loved him, and Will looked away from the road long enough to glance at Hannibal. He was staring at Will as though transfixed. There was a shine in his eyes and his lips were parted just the slightest bit.

The latter, Will's learned, is one of Hannibal's few tells - one that he doesn’t seem able to control even when he tries to; when Hannibal’s lower lip sags like that, just the slightest fraction of an inch, it is because he is mystified or astounded, or else is feeling extremely hopeful but not entirely certain that he will get whatever something it is that he wants very badly.

Will made a small astonished sound, a noise only vaguely related to a short laugh, and shook his head in wonderment.

Still, Hannibal was not ready to let it go. “But you could have a family, Will. You and Margot and the child.”

It was on the tip of Will’s tongue to say that families are highly overrated, but he knew enough about Hannibal’s past to guess what offense and hurt that might provoke.

Anyway, Hannibal was not really arguing the merits of a domestic life, Will knew. He was trying to understand why Will would have accepted him when given what he felt to be better options.

"I don't want to be with Margot," he told Hannibal. Then he added gently, “And anyway, she’s a lesbian, Hannibal,” and cut his eyes to the side just in time to see Hannibal blink rapidly as his nostrils flared, releasing a relieved sigh almost silently.

“And Tommy is Margot’s kid. Legally, he isn’t my son - my name doesn’t appear on his birth certificate and Margot has never acknowledge me as the father. Nor has Tommy been encouraged to think of me as such; I’m just the friendly man who visits his mother occasionally. Margot might tell him more when he’s older, but that’s her prerogative. I’ve only asked that he be strongly discouraged from attempting to carry on my family name.”

“Whose idea was it?” Hannibal asked, and Will glanced at him again, trying to decide if that was a roundabout way to ask if they’d had sex together, but Hannibal seemed simply curious.

“Margot approached me," Will told Hannibal, and explained to him the situation with her father's will. "After a bit of discussion I agreed to provide her with a donation.” A silly thing to feel shy about, Will knew, especially in present company, but none the less he tugged his earlobe anxiously and pointedly avoided Hannibal’s eyes as he said this. “This was shortly

after I'd recovered from the encephalitis and I was feeling… very mortal at the time. And it felt like I was simply doing her a favor. I like to help people when I can.

"But I started to worry about it almost as soon as Margot found out for sure that she was pregnant. I wondered what the hell I'd been thinking - any kid that had a combination of Graham and Verger blood was sure to strike out in a big way. But I was wrong about that.

"That boy is so gentle, Hannibal," Will said, and he felt the bite of tears in his eyes. "He's just the sweetest and kindest little thing that that I have ever seen. Every time I see him I just think, how the hell did *I* help make something that good?" Just at the thought of the boy Will felt his heart swelled with pride and wonderment and other emotions that he couldn't easily name, and the tears started to fall then.

Will took one hand off the wheel to wipe angrily at his face, and when from the corner of his tear-blurred eye he saw Hannibal lift a hand and move it tentatively towards Will's knee, he said, "Don't touch me right now."

More sharply than he meant to. Just like always.

They drove on in silence, Will at war with himself, trying to bring his breathing under control and blinking back tears as well as he could.

When he felt in better control of himself, he said, "I'm sorry," without knowing if he was apologizing for snapping or for the tears or for some other, more fundamental failing.

Hannibal eyes were fixed on the view outside of the window, offering Will as much privacy as possibly within the confines of the Fury. "It would be easy, Will, to lose ourselves in wistful speculation as to who we might have been had our lives unfolded differently, but you will only harm yourself if you focus on such thoughts for too long. We are what we are, and should try to be content with that."

Will's hand crossed the space between them to find Hannibal's own, and squeezed it tight.

Now, Margot joins them again, and the instant the nanny has gone from the room a change overtakes her. Before, she was the picture of well-bred womanhood bearing up bravely under crushing grief. Now she drops that act, and the relief of having been rid of a terribly heavy burden smooths the premature lines on her face. She is more confident, too, even if there is a fragile, looking-over-her-shoulder quality to that confidence.

She motions for them to sit, and Hannibal and Will take the settee, Thomas balanced on Will's knee, while Margot lowers herself into an upholstered chair across from them.

"Was it you?" she asks Will, straightforward. There is no obvious emotional inflection to her voice, but the way she asks makes Hannibal think that she already knows the answer.

There's been a change to Will, too. Now that they are alone, he has becomes someone closer to but not exactly the same as the person that Hannibal has gotten to know since he

discovered Will's secret. It is not the real Will that speaks with Margot, not the spiteful and vulnerable man that Hannibal has decided to love, raw emotions and sharp edges and all, but that truth is not as closely guarded as it had been when Hannibal was still his patient.

He sees Will - his Will - in flashes, in much the same way that he glances the scars on Margot's ankle when she crosses her legs or along her collarbone when she leans forward.

"I am sorry that we went and did everything by ourselves," Will tells her. "I know that you'd been hoping to take care of it yourself someday soon."

"At least it's done," Margot says, and Hannibal sees the steel in the woman and admires her for it. She pauses, looking at Will and Thomas. "He's getting big so fast… I was starting to worry."

Will tussles Thomas' hair and then gives him a tiny nudge. "Go see your uncle Hannibal," he suggests, pointing along the boy's line of sight. "He's a new friend and he really likes you."

Hannibal is not inexperienced with children, but almost all of those that he has cared for in the past were smaller versions of himself; conflict orphans, scared, scarred, suspicious. He hardly knows what to do when Thomas obediently takes himself from Will's lap and plops down on the couch beside Hannibal. "Hi," the boy says though, so Hannibal says "hi," back.

Will has leaned forward to take Margot's hands in his own. "Listen to me very carefully," he tells her. "I never would have let that happen."

Margot says something in return, but Hannibal doesn't hear it because he is looking down at Thomas and is thinking, *I took his uncle's liver out and I showed it to him, and that was almost the least of it.*

And then Hannibal thinks, *Mason will never be able to hurt this boy because of what I did,* and that thought makes everything easier to deal with, and he covers his face with both his hands and counts to three, and when he lowers them again he is pulling a face that makes Thomas bubble over with giggles.

"Shhhh," Hannibal says, putting a figure to his own lips, and the boy mimics him perfectly.

Will is saying, "No one knows where Mason was going the night he disappeared?"

"The servants who might have hazarded a guess have been paid off. No one here is going to miss him. They won't talk."

Will nods, satisfied. "I remember what that was like."

"I have to tell you, Will, I knew that you wanted to hurt him and I love you for feeling that way. But I didn't expect… that degree of damage. Of mutilation. It shocked me."

Hannibal sees Will getting ready to open his mouth, to dissemble or to lie outright, and Hannibal clears his throat and sits up straight. He focuses his eyes on Margot, and she turns to him.

“It was you,” Margot says to Hannibal, not a question. “I thought it might have been when I first saw you.”

Hannibal’s eyes shifted to Will, looking to see if it is safe to answer, and when he nods Hannibal says, “It was primarily me, yes.”

Margot’s appraisal of him is frank, but it is difficult for him to know what she might be thinking. He feels numb under her gaze, his own emotions locked away from himself, but he thinks perhaps that he might be frightened or angry, because Thomas has retreated to Will’s side of the settee and is sucking his thumb anxiously as he watches Hannibal.

“What was it like?” Margot asks.

“In what way do you mean?”

She considers the question carefully. “I suppose I’m asking how much he suffered.”

“As much and for as long as it was within my ability to make him,” Hannibal tells her. He raises his chin. “I believe that it was roughly three hours, from the beginning to when he lost consciousness for the last time. That’s how much he suffered.”

Hannibal see her blanch, but she lifts her own chin, just as stiffnecked and defiant as Hannibal. “Good,” Margot says.

Chapter 12

Bev draws the hair from Mason's throat with a pair of long forceps and puts it under a magnifier. Looking down at the hair, her brain catalogs its traits and comes to a conclusion almost instantaneously.

The specific length of the hair, plus its unique thickness and stiff texture, stand out, but more than that is its distinctive multi-chromatic quality. It is not the same shade along its entire length, and when Beverly shifts it under the light the color seems to shift, straw blonde to dull grey to silver.

It never occurs to her that the hair could belong to anyone other than Hannibal, but at first she assumes that it's a mistake.

"Since when does Hannibal contaminate evidence?" she says to Zeller and Price, and in one corner of her mind she is already imagining how much fun ribbing Hannibal about this is going to be. Most agents lost a hair or left a stray finger print among the evidence from time to time, but this is the first time that she's caught Hannibal in a mistake.

For just a few seconds, Bev is able to look forward to sitting down across from him in the employee cafeteria for lunch, just like they have every day for almost two weeks now, him sniffing over whatever's on her tray while he unpacks his own bagged lunch, struggling in the most endearingly stiff way not to be transparently rude about his disgust for the bosco sticks or french fries that Bev enjoys, and telling him what she found.

She's curious as to how he will take it. Bev is not entirely done testing out the waters with Hannibal, but she's reasonably sure that he's trustworthy. He has an ugly temper, she knows, but he has yet to point it at her. If he proves that he can take a bit of gentle teasing about his mistake, Bev thinks that might be the last hurdle to her really thinking about him as a friend.

But even as she is thinking all of this, the part of her mind that is as brilliant and uncompromising as the sharp edge of a knife - the part that makes her so good at her job - is asking a second question: How *did Hannibal manage to do this, anyway?*

The hair didn't fall off Hannibal's head while he was leaning over the body, and it didn't brush off from a bit of clothing that it was hanging to. It was all the way in the back of Verger's oral cavity, as though it had been shoved there. She almost hadn't seen it at all.

Zeller says, "He didn't. He hasn't worked on this one."

Bev blinks, remembering - Hannibal had still been in St. Louis when they brought Verger in. "That's his hair though," she says, motioning with her eyes towards the magnifier in which the hair rested, soon to be identified as a vital piece of evidence.

"Check the log," Zeller offers. "Maybe he came in to look at the body."

"Maybe," Bev says, but she is uneasy. And she can see that Zeller and Price are, too.

“Creepy guy,” Price says, as he swabs a fluid sample from inside the abdominal cavity.

Bev feels a spike of annoyance. “You’re a creepy guy,” she says. “Half the people who work here are creepy. The scary thing is that I’m probably the most socially well adjusted person in this building.”

“Geez, Bev,” Price says. He’s obviously feeling hurt, but she doesn’t apologize. The analytical part of her mind tells her that she wouldn’t be so annoyed with him if she wasn’t legitimately worried.

“You are at least a little creepy,” Zeller says to Price, and Price makes a sour face at him.

They work in silence for a while, until Zeller says, “It’s not as though he’s the only person in the world with that hair type.”

He’s trying to defuse the tension in the room, Bev knows. To make peace.

But she isn’t reassured.

Bev knows that the hair belongs to Hannibal.

She skips lunch to think about how she might go about proving it.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If we do this,” Will says to Hannibal, just a few hours before the Dragon pays them a call, “I’m scared that I’ll end up hurting you some.”

And Hannibal, who has led him up to the bedroom and taken, matter-of-factly, the bottle of lube and the box of condoms from the small paper bag he carried and placed them on the bedside table, leans forward to rest his chin on Will’s shoulder and says, “I’m not afraid of you, Will.”

He fears that his words will sound like an insult in Will’s ears, or that he will hear them as a challenge or even a threat. Instead, Will hisses air out through his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, as though in pain, but his hand gropes for Hannibal’s own. Hannibal gives it to him, lets him squeeze it as hard as he needs to.

Hannibal runs his other hand under the back of Will’s shirt, feeling the fresh scar tissue, the rows of pin prick bumps left over from stitches that Hannibal made himself. He can feel Will’s heart pounding. *Desire or fear?* Hannibal wonders, but of course it is both; an overwhelming eagerness, yes, but so much fear, and only a little of it having to do directly with Hannibal himself.

Will turns his head to look at him, and in Will’s eyes Hannibal sees a deeper understanding of Hannibal and his desires than should be possible for him to grasp. He’s given Will nearly everything of himself willingly - eagerly - but Will’s found more than he should by all rights have, gone deeper and looked more keenly at what Hannibal is than even Hannibal himself has, and has found in the hidden places so much that he wants for himself.

These facts are to Hannibal great wonders.

Their lips meet. When they pull apart, Will leans his head against Hannibal’s shoulder and whispers, “Undress.”

Hannibal feels Will’s eyes follow him as he rises from the bed and begins to do so. He doesn’t hurry. His hands undo the buttons on his shirt deftly, one at a time, and when he is finished he shrugs out of the shirt and folds it neatly before sitting it on top of Will’s dresser. He unbuckles his belt and places it beside the shirt.

Hannibal is proud of his body, and he enjoys the sense of being watched by Will. The rapt silence that stretches on as he places his pants on top of the pile is almost too fine a thing to end.

But when he steps out of his boxers, Hannibal hears from behind him a sharp intake of breath, and that’s even better.

Will moves silently. When Hannibal turns to face him he is already close, barely a foot of open space remaining between them. He takes Hannibal by the wrists and draws him, almost reverently, back to the bed, guiding him down until he is sitting on the edge of the mattress.

Then he goes to his knees before Hannibal.

Will pushes on the insides of Hannibal's thighs, the touch soft but insistent, and Hannibal spreads his legs further apart to give Will room to move in closer to him.

Anticipating, Hannibal lays his hands on Will's shoulders. "No," Will says, but gently, and repositions them at the edge of the bed, and Hannibal understands that they are to remain there.

Even in this, it is in Hannibal's nature to guard his expressions, and when Will takes him into his mouth he is distantly anxious that there is not enough of what he feels visible in his face, that Will might be hurt or discouraged at being offered little more than a sharp intake of breath and a quickening of his breathing. But Will's eyes are tipped up towards him, watching Hannibal intently as he works over his cock, and those eyes are knowing and are pleased with the knowledge they they posses. They look maroon in the light of the setting sun that filters through the drapes, and at this angle seem very large.

Teeth scrape against his skin - dangerous. *Exhilarating*. Hannibal's heels lift up from the carpet as the muscles in his legs constrict. His fists close around the quilt, and later he will think that all anxieties aside, Will was right to guide Hannibal's hands away from his body, because in the aftermath Hannibal will find crescent-shaped purple welts on the inside of his palms, marks left there by his nails even though the barrier of the blanket he clenched.

The look in Will's eyes is as good as a smirk, laugh lines crinkling around them, and Hannibal is struck suddenly by the strangeness of his situation as he thinks, *I'm getting a blow job from a cannibal*, and the hilarity of that bubbles up inside of him and the sound that he makes as he comes is very much like a laugh.

He sees Will's throat work, Adam's apple bobbing then rising again. Swallowing - consuming him - and for a long moment Hannibal feels deeply uneasy, caught up in the implications.

But when Will stands, Hannibal's attention is drawn to the fact that he can see the outline of Will's erection pressed painfully against the inside of his pants. With the exception of his shoes, Will is still fully dressed, the fine linen shirt and silk socks fitting together with a pair of well-worn jean in an incongruous harmony that Hannibal finds wonderfully appealing. Nonetheless, he would like very much to see Will unclothed, as he is himself, but he accepts that Will is not ready for that degree of exposure.

He'd also like to pull Will down into his lap, to draw his cock out into his palm and help him with it while he holds Will's body pressed close against his own. But instead Will circles around him, staying deliberately just out of reach, and takes the lube and condoms from the bedside table, which Hannibal thinks is just as fine an idea.

When Will sets them on the bed beside Hannibal, he sees that Will's hands shake only slightly - no more, he thinks, than might be expected of a tightly strung person in such a state

of excitement and urgency, and that's good too.

"Turn over," Will says, his breathing harsh, and Hannibal does as asked. He folds his arms under his chin, a pillow below his elbows to prop himself up, and waits.

The lube is cold. Hannibal shivers slightly when it touches him and murmurs into the pillow, "Chilly."

"I'm sorry," Will says, and there's something so earnestly sincere about his voice that Hannibal wants to laugh again, wants to hold Will's face in his hands and rain kisses down on it, wants to forgive him every slight and harsh word and damning crime.

He shudders again, but pleasantly, when he feels Will begin to test his hole with one finger and then another, opening him up. Will's other hand is spread across Hannibal's left shoulder blade, and Hannibal feels the heavy weight of him in the press of that hand against his flesh. Will's clothing, Hannibal has come to understand, is deliberately tailored to make him look more slight than he really is; before the night at the hotel, Hannibal hadn't really understood that beneath Will's clothing there was hidden compact, powerful muscle. It's just another layer of the disguise that Will use to make himself seem harmless.

"Have you done this before?" Will asks, and his voice comes as a whisper not far above Hannibal's right ear. "Let someone fuck you?"

"Never with someone I loved," Hannibal says, and Will shifts the hand that was balanced on Hannibal's shoulder blade to his bicep instead, and leans over Hannibal to lay a line of kisses along his shoulder and up the side of his neck.

Hannibal turns his head towards Will and their mouths meet again, and when at last Will pulls away he asks him, "You ready?" and Hannibal breaths, "Oh yes."

Will slides down Hannibal's back. He guides his cock inside Hannibal, then Will settles his stomach against his back, one hand curled around Hannibal's shoulder and the other braced against the mattress, and begins to thrust in a slow, careful rhythm.

Hannibal is nearly silent, intently focused on every facet of every sensation, storing it all away in his memory like a precious jewel that might be taken out and to be explored again and again, but the sounds that Will makes are ragged, desperately overwhelmed, and, Hannibal thinks, closely akin to pain.

He feels Will's breath, hot on the back of his neck and coming in quick gasps as his hips pick up the tempo, and then Hannibal feels Will press his upper teeth against his skin. They rest there, at the midpoint between the curve of Hannibal's neck and the ball of his shoulder, for long enough that Hannibal begins to believe that nothing more will happen, but then Will's head jerks forward in time with a particularly hard thrust and the teeth lock onto his flesh, and Hannibal smells the scent of his own blood.

Grinding his own teeth together to keep silent, Hannibal reaches back with one hand and tangles his fingers in Will hair and yanks. He does this not in an effort to tear Will away, but

because he has wanted to for some time, and it seems fair to him that he should be able to do so now.

Hannibal rides the pain out, and when Will comes, perhaps twenty seconds later, he releases his hold on Will's hair in the same instant that Will's jaw unclenches from his skin.

Will rolls off of Hannibal, and in the brief glance that Hannibal catches of his face he sees that Will is mortified and intent on fleeing. Hannibal catches him by the wrist before he can, and for an instant he is afraid that Will might attack him or else hurt himself trying to break away. Instead, he goes completely still, and somehow that's worse.

Will is like a rabbit caught in a snare. The panic is huge in him, so stark that Hannibal can smell it in the air over the fragrances of blood and sex, his fear of rejection and of punishment tangled up with self-loathing and a bone-deep terror that Hannibal can see reflected in his eyes, a terror that he might easily have done much worse.

Hannibal doesn't want any of this now. The bite doesn't matter to him. What he wants is to hold Will close to himself and lay quietly together so that he can bask in the feeling of being wondrous - of being loved.

But he is not sure how to say any of this - if these are things that can be articulated and if in this moment Will would be willing or even able to understand them.

Instead he says, "Will, I'm not angry with you. Stay here with me, Will. Please."

And though it is hard for him, Will does.

Chapter End Notes

This is only the second time that I've tried to write an extended sex scene.

In the past, I've had a lot of trouble reading (and never mind writing) sexually explicit fic, because they tended to trigger traumatic memories in me. One of the things that I've been surprised but very happy to learn since I've joined the HANNIBAL fandom is that I can not only handle reading/writing sex scenes, but can actually enjoy doing so.

But I still feel very new at this, and hope that I did okay.

We'll get some more extended comfort/discussion of what happened in the next chapter, as well as another major event...

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal sits perched on the edge of the tub, using the shower wand to run a jet of warm water over the bite wound. Will watches pink rivulets of mingled blood and water flow down his arm and circle the drain.

He's naked still, and is entirely relaxed and unselfconscious about it.

Will, on the other hand, feels hideously exposed despite being fully dressed. He stands a few feet away from Hannibal, passing a bottle of rubbing alcohol from one hand to another, his fear a hot stone in the center of his belly. He would like to disappear.

He's dithering and he knows it, so he tries to correct for that by saying, "Let me help you."

There is a moment in which something suspicious and maybe even fearful flashes in Hannibal's eyes, and Will hears the echo of those words reverberate in the bone arena of his skull and feels again the syringe in his grasp, the solicitous intimacy of his free hand on the small of Hannibal's back right before he sunk the needle into the meat of Hannibal's neck.

Then Hannibal is smiling up at him, the expression calculated to reassure. Graciously sweeping all of that way.

"You're worrying about it too much," Hannibal tells him, and Will knows that the scope of that 'it' extends beyond the way Will used his teeth on him, but is not sure how much further it goes. "I think it's going to be absolutely fine. And if it looks like it's getting infected then I'll see someone. People show up at the urgent care with love bites everyday - no one's even going to bat an eye.

"This isn't even especially bad, honestly."

"Don't tell me, 'I've seen worse.' I know the context that comes with that."

Will can see in his mind's eyes, as he did on the night of the stake-out, Hannibal ruined the way that the Dragon's victims were ruined, but this time he understands that he is looking at his own handiwork. The image has all of the intensity of a nightmare, and he feels the shakes starting up again. He curses himself.

Hannibal is looking up at him intently, his head cocked at an angle.

"Have you considered the possibility that I might have liked it?"

Will sniffs. "You're no masochist."

Hannibal rises. He takes his pajama bottoms from where he left them, folded on the edge of the sink, and steps into them.

He stands in front of the mirror, rolling his shoulder and shifting his body to see the bite from every angle, flagrantly admiring it. Somehow it doesn't look as bad as Will feared it might have, but he's appalled nonetheless by how deep it is.

"No, but it's something from you. And it's there forever now - I hope, if it scars the way I would like it to - no matter else happens. To be marked in this way is exciting… It heralds all sorts of possibilities."

Will wants tell Hannibal that he ought not to be looking at it that way - that what he'd done to Hannibal ought be viewed a warning sign rather than some guarantor of their future, and he wants to tell Hannibal that he is a man with large and often uncontrollable emotions but that what Will feels for Hannibal dwarfs anything that he has felt before, and that this is frightening for him and dangerous for Hannibal because the scale of the thing is such that Will can not easily see what parts of it have sharp teeth and jagged edges.

He wants to tell Hannibal to have a care for himself, to exercise more concern for his own safety and well-being, because as things stand Will can not even begin to predict himself, but he knows that if he says these things that he won't be heeded.

Instead he says, "I don't feel that way about the scar that you gave me," and he sees Hannibal look back at him through the mirror, studying for not the first time the pink line that marks Will's cheek. It's puckered towards the center, an uneven tangle of scar tissue.

"No," Hannibal says, his face set in grim lines, "that's different."

The mirror reflects Will's anxiety and misery back at him.

Hannibal sighs. "Come on then, let's do the rubbing alcohol if you feel as though you must."

He leans his shoulder over the sink and positions the rest of his body so Will can move in close. Right before Will tips the bottle to pour the antiseptic over the injury he sees Hannibal take a deep breath and close his eyes. His face remains placid while the alcohol burns at the torn flesh, but when he opens his eyes and sees Will getting ready to douse it again, he demurs.

"Just to be safe," Will insists, fully aware that he sounds absurdly desperate. "I just want to make sure -"

"I know. I know, Will," Hannibal cuts in. And he allows, "Once more, just to be safe."

Hannibal could have put the bandage on himself, but he lets Will help with it, and Will is grateful for that.

"I'm going to let the dog in," he says, when the wound is covered and mess cleared away, and Hannibal nods and takes himself back to the bed. "Maybe I'll get a snack, too. You want anything?"

Pulling the covers over himself, Hannibal yawns like a drowsy lion. "Just for you to come back soon."

“Sap,” he scoffs, though the words go a long distance towards making him feel better.

He takes the stairs quickly, not wanting to keep Hannibal waiting and eager in his own right to get back to bed, but when he opens the backdoor and calls Beth’s name she doesn’t come.

Behind him, Will hears footsteps; a big man with a light tread.

“Hannibal,” he says, turning, a worried frown wrinkling his brow, “where’s the dog -” but he stops there, because it isn’t Hannibal behind him.

He has just time enough to register that much, and then a powerful hand wraps itself around his throat, choking him. Then he’s dangling in the air, that one hand lifting him as easily as if he were a rag doll, and he is brought face to face with the Dragon.

Chapter End Notes

(Nobody worry too much please, I promise not to kill the dog).

Chapter 15

What frightens Hannibal the most, after it is all over, is this: he almost fell asleep.

The knowledge that he might have drifted off while the Dragon choked the life from Will, that he might have slept through all of that and still been sleeping when the Dragon came for him is something that will in the future keep Hannibal lying awake in the dark, his senses focused on detecting any intruder who might be intent on stopping the steady rise and fall of Will's chest.

It's instinct that makes Hannibal get up from the bed and go looking for Will after all, or maybe just clinginess.

He knows something is wrong as soon as he reaches the bottom of the stairs. He can't see the backdoor, but he knows that it is hanging open because the air in the hallways is chilly and redolent with early autumn scents, fallen leaves and the rotting windfall apples beneath the trees that stand in Will's back yard. Hannibal moves silently through the house.

The tattoo on Dragon's back is illuminated by the warm light of the kitchen. The beast inked there seems to undulate as the muscles in the Dragon's back flex as he lifts Will off the ground.

He can hear the sounds Will makes as the Dragon chokes off his air, desperate animalistic noises, can see the way that Will's legs kick uselessly, finding neither purchase against the too distant floor nor connecting with the Dragon's body, and seeing and hearing these things invoke in Hannibal a terror deeper than anything he has known since childhood.

The fear is a distraction and for him to be distracted now is dangerous, potentially fatally so, and Hannibal crushes it down. He silences, too, his love for Will and his distress at seeing him harmed and all of his hopes for their future together, and substitutes in their place a cold and calculating rage that is intent only on taking from the Dragon that which is not his and punishing him for the offense.

Hannibal does not like doing this - knows in fact that it is part of what is wrong with him, this ability to switch off his feelings - but it was difficult to think clearly around fear, and he knows that if he doesn't think clearly now Will will die.

Will is only still alive, Hannibal knows, because the Dragon wants a chance to hurt him more before he kills him, but that he won't be nearly as invested in causing Will to suffer as he is in getting his teeth into Hannibal. Hannibal understands, too, just by seeing the ease with which he holds Will aloft with a single powerfully muscled hand, that the Dragon is stronger than he is.

What these two facts add up to, taken together, is if Hannibal tries to pounce on him, as he did Mason, the Dragon is more likely to crush Will's windpipe than to drop him. Instead, Hannibal circles around the kitchen island, letting Dolarhyde see him.

There had been no photos of Dolarhyde, and though Hannibal has seen the statements from his coworkers, he is still surprised by how little of the monster is in his face. Dolarhyde's killings implied a profound sense of social alienation, but the man is quite normal looking - even handsome. There is a scar, yes, but it does little worse than give his face a bit of extra character.

"I'm glad to see that you aren't dead," Hannibal tells him. "Suicide is the enemy of great minds."

Will hands claw at the Dragon's skin, drawing lines of blood from flesh that might as well have been stone for all the reaction it gives. The Dragon ignores Will, watching Hannibal intently instead, and Hannibal looks only briefly at Will before fixing his eyes on the Dragon, but in that instant inside of his mind he is saying to Will, *Play possum.*

"I promised to show you something important," the Dragon tells him.

Hannibal hears the sound of Will driving his fists against the flesh of the Dragon's arm, ineffectual, each blow landing weaker than the last after a longer delay.

"You did. I want to see it."

The Dragon glances down at Will and Hannibal takes that as an opportunity to do the same, but he waste only a fraction of a second looking at Will, hanging limp and still in the Dragon's grasp, because as soon as he begins to lower Will to the ground Hannibal is moving, and so he does not actually see Will reach out and draw the knife from the sheath on Dolarhyde's belt, but he knows that Will has done so even as he is vaulting over the kitchen island to reach them, because he hears Dolarhyde grunt when Will drives it into his belly and he smells the flow of fresh blood.

Will dances away from the Dragon's swinging fist, and then Hannibal's feet land directly behind him and Hannibal slams his face against the marble countertop. Teeth shatter and spill across the kitchen floor, and there is a surreal moment where Hannibal thinks that he must have somehow hit Dolarhyde hard enough to knock his jaw loose before he realizes that he is looking at the lower plate of a set of dentures.

One of Dolarhyde's hands flex, reaching for him, and Hannibal drives his face into the marble again hears the bones in his cheek crunch. He's still then, and Will, leaning over with his hands on his knees wheezes, "Bottom of the the third drawer behind you," and Hannibal reaches into the drawer and flips up the false bottom and finds the handcuffs there.

He locks one around Dolarhyde's wrist and drags his inert body to the sink and locks the second cuff around the pipes that sprout out from under it, and Will is already outside, waving around a flashlight he has picked up somewhere along the way and calling Beth's name in a painful, croaking voice.

Dolarhyde stirs, looks up at him with dazed, yellow eyes. Hannibal takes Dolarhyde's free hand and positions the fingers between the flat of the blade that still sticks up from his belly. "Keep pressure there, if you want to stay alive a little longer," Hannibal says, and he might have said more, but now he hears Will calling his own name, his voice urgent.

Hannibal goes to him.

Chapter 16

Will goes down on his hands and knees in the grass that borders the porch. He shines the flashlight under the porch, sweeping from one end to the other, and when the beam of light catches a flash of shining eyes Will freezes the flashlight there and sees Beth, crouched low against the dirt, her left side matted with blood.

When he says her name she whimpers plaintively but shies back further under the porch, where Will can't reach her. He takes a moment to put up a facade of calm, pushing back against the burning pain in his throat and his fear of what's been done to the dog and that was almost done to himself and to Hannibal, and his desire to lay a hurt on Dolarhyde for all that he did and tried to do, and when he's locked all of that away for the time being he says Beth's name again, but this time in a sing-song, coaxing voice, pitched as high as he can manage around his aching throat.

"Come here, baby doll," he says, trying not to think about how much he'd like to peel the skin off of Dolarhyde for hurting the both of them, lest Beth pick up on his anger and become even more frightened. "It's alright, you're such a good girl, honey, come on now," he wheedles, and she inches forward on her elbows, whimpering at the pain the movement causes.

When she's close enough, Will reaches his arm under the porch and pulls her out by the collar as gently as he can. He gets to his feet and draws her up into his arms.

He says, "Hannibal," as he starts up the porch steps, and Hannibal is at the backdoor almost as soon as the word is out of his mouth.

"Oh," Hannibal says flatly, when Will moves past him, quickly but without panic, the dog in his arms.

He spares a glance at Dolarhyde, chained at the other end of the kitchen, and when he sees the man is conscious and watching them Will skins back his lips and shows him his teeth - straight and white and very sharp. "Just you wait," Will says to Dolarhyde, "I'm gonna take my goddamn time with you, you crazy sonofabitch."

He knows as he says it that it's a threat he probably won't get a chance to follow through on; Dolarhyde is losing blood quickly, despite the way he's pressing his hands over his middle, and Will has more important things to take care of right now.

But he would like for it to be true - and more to the point, he would like for his words to frighten Dolarhyde, though he's not sure if they do. His eyes track Will but it is difficult to say what they see.

Will lays Beth on the kitchen table and waves Hannibal over. "Put pressure on the wound," Will tells him, and the moment of hesitation goes on just long enough that Will looks up at Hannibal. He's glassy-eyed, his face slack with the closest thing to a dazed expression that

Will has ever seen on him. Delayed reaction to seeing Dolarhyde strangling him, Will thinks, as much as a response to Beth being in such a bad way.

“Hannibal,” Will says gently, “you know how to do this.”

Hannibal blinks quickly, three times in quick succession, and snaps out of it. “Of course,” he says, a vaguely offended note in his voice, and Will steps back as Hannibal puts his hands over the stab wound.

“I thought that she would be dead,” Hannibal says, loudly enough for Will to hear him as he ducks into the bathroom for the first aide kit and some towels.

Will does not tell him how uncertain he is if the dog will survive. He says instead, “She got away from him and hid,” and when he gestures for Hannibal to move his hands so Will can put on the bandages, Hannibal’s hands go to Beth’s head, cradling it, and Hannibal says with soft admiration, “Clever girl.”

“I’m taking her to the emergency vet on Central,” he tells Hannibal. “I’m going right now, and I need you to wrap things up here in the meantime.” Hannibal doesn't argue with him, and Will is grateful for that.

Will picks up the towels and says, “Carry her out for me,” and then hurries ahead of Hannibal into the garage. He spreads the towel over the front passenger seat of the Fury, then steps back so Hannibal can lay her down there.

“You make up your own mind about how to take care of Dolarhyde, alright?” Will says, going quickly to the other side of the car, but then he hesitates with his fingers on the door handle. He looks over the top of the Fury at Hannibal and says, “Just… be careful. He’s ungodly strong, Hannibal, it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.” Will is struck by the irony of that, because just a few short weeks ago he would have said that Hannibal was the most uncannily powerful person he’d ever encountered. But the Dragon had been a world apart. “Take him to the basement if you’re going to cut on him but make sure he’s tied up tight if you try and move him. Don’t give him any chance at you.

“Meet me at the vet’s when you’re done.”

He sees Hannibal watching him as he pulls the car out of the garage and into the drive, but then he turns away and goes back inside. It's only after he's out on the road that it occurs to Will that he ought to have told Hannibal that he loved him before he left.

As Hannibal heads back into the house, he is unsure of what he means to do when he gets there.

He pulls a chair out from the table and turns it backwards, so its back faces Dolarhyde, then Hannibal sits. The bars of the chair’s back are a comforting barrier between the two of them, even if they only give the illusion of separation.

Hannibal watches Dolarhyde, his head cocked to the side, and thinks, *I could just set here and watch him bleed out*. That would be the easiest way. It wouldn't take too much longer.

"What was it that you wanted to show me?" he asks.

At first, he doesn't think Dolarhyde will answer. He seems a husk of a man, dried out and empty, sitting in the growing pool of his own blood with his face turned towards the wall. But he says, "I wanted you to see."

Dolarhyde's jaw is broken. It's hard for Hannibal to understand him, but he listens closely and when he has sorted the sounds into words inside of his head, Hannibal says, "See what?"

"My Becoming," Dolarhyde hisses, and Hannibal hears in his voice the pain of ecstasy gone to ashes. "And, perhaps, the means of your own."

That stilted, mystical way of speaking, so similar to the letter that he'd sent Hannibal. Hannibal knows that his own speech rhythms are often perceived as strange, esoteric or evasive, but this is something else. *He doesn't really know how people sound when they speak to one another*, he realizes.

"But that's over with now," Dolarhyde says bitterly, and spits blood.

He looks up at Hannibal and his yellow eyes are lucid. It is possible that Dolarhyde has been mad in the past, but Hannibal does not believe that he is mad now. "I'd *won*," he said, enunciating carefully. "I beat the Dragon. *I* saved her. *Me*. But then the two of you tore it all down anyway. You and Graham are monsters."

There is a moment in which Hannibal wants to laugh, hearing this damned murderer of ten, rapist of women and killer of children, calling *him* a monster, but just as suddenly it isn't at all funny. He can only follow part of Dolarhyde's train of thought but he worries that the man's logic is sound.

Hannibal has made a deliberate point, throughout his career, of avoiding those who had been close to the killers he's captured - he worries that they might recognize in him the same spark present in their unmasked loved ones, and that they will be distressed by this, or else that they will accuse him.

Hannibal has not met Reba, but he knows who she is and what Dolarhyde put her through. There is a fundamental part of himself that is more sympathetic to her sense of having been betrayed than he is to Dolarhyde's struggle for control.

"She might come to see you in the hospital," he says, and wonders if he intended for the words to sound as cruel as they do.

Dolarhyde turns face away from Hannibal again. He's silent while Hannibal is on the phone with Jack, but when he hangs up Hannibal sees that he's taken his hand away from his wounded belly, and that the blood is flowing faster now.

For a moment he considers doing nothing - simply letting Dolarhyde have it his way. But then Hannibal stands.

When he catches Dolarhyde's free arm and pins it under his knee, he feels the way that the strength has gone out of it. It's simply the blood loss, he knows rationally, but there is a part of his mind that insists that there is more to it than that - that the Dragon has abandoned Dolarhyde, and has left nothing but a pathetic and broken man in its wake.

Hannibal kneels over Dolarhyde and presses his hands against his bleeding middle, and that is how the paramedics find them, perhaps ten minutes later.

Jack is not far behind.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Last chapter before it all comes falling down :)))

Hannibal waits until they are alone in the car to tell Will about Dolarhyde.

“Christ, I feel like I dodged a bullet,” Will says, getting in behind the wheel of the Fury. “Like we all did.”

The news was good; if Dolarhyde’s blade had gone in at just a slightly different angle it would have caught the spleen and Beth probably would have bled to death before Will even found her, but luck was on their side and it hadn’t hit anything vital. She was doing well, and though they wanted to hold her for observation, if things continued to go as expected she might be home as early as tomorrow.

The vet’s eyes strayed to the bruise blooming on Will’s throat while he was explaining this, where the shape of a large hand could clearly be made out, and though Will had already explained that he and the dog had been attacked by a stranger, Hannibal felt that there was something about the way the man looked at him from the corner of his eye that implied accusation.

Will felt it too, Hannibal knew, because he drew Hannibal in closer to him, curling his arm around Hannibal’s waist and leaning against him as though seeking to comfort, while at the same time turning icy with the vet.

He'd been like that the entire time they sat together in the waiting room, too - touchy. Will's hands were on Hannibal almost constantly, an endless series of consoling gestures; clutching Hannibal's fingers, rubbing at the small of his back, leaning his head against Hannibal's shoulder. He let Will baby him, knowing that in doing so he was helping Will to stay calm, but Hannibal didn’t try to touch Will in return.

He was sorry that it had taken him as long as it did to meet Will here, but he hadn't dared leave the house until the last of the agents had gone.

It struck Hannibal, as they wanted for news, what a beautiful looking man Will was. Even bruised and disheveled, his eyes ringed red with exhaustion and tears that he’d cried before Hannibal arrived to give him someone else to focus on, he was beautiful. And as ugly as the situation was, he’d felt a sort of reticent pride at being touched with such care by someone like Will, out where the staff and the other clients could see them.

And too, it was good to know that he was someone from whom Will could draw strength.

He still feels that way now, sitting in the car with Will and watching him going through the mundane motions of buckling up and putting the key in the ignition to start the Fury; proud of Will and of himself for having him. He hopes that things will be well when he tells Will what he did.

Will turns on the headlights but when he reaches for the push button gearshift, Hannibal catches his hand and holds it in his own.

“I let the FBI have Dolarhyde,” he says.

Under the shine of the parking lot’s lights, Hannibal watches Will think about that. His skin looks golden in the glow.

“That was incredibly cruel of you,” Will says at last. He does not say this as a admonition, but simply as a statement of fact.

Hannibal had been prepared for disapproval, but not on those terms. Hearing it put that way makes him feel suspicious of himself.

“I felt badly for him,” Hannibal tells him, not sure if it’s the truth or not.

When Will answers, “I don’t understand that,” Hannibal knows that he’s pretending, but then he says, "You mean that you felt that he was beneath you."

Hannibal shrug, feigning disinterested in the nuance. "I wanted him to have more time - a better chance - to see who he really is.”

“He isn’t going to get that. In the off chance that they don’t put him to death, they’ll stick him in a black hole somewhere until he loses whatever’s left of his mind. You know that, Hannibal.”

He supposes that he does, but he would like to shy away from that knowledge, and not only because he can't dismiss the idea that this might have been exactly why he did it, so instead of answering Hannibal says, “You’ll have to give a statement about what happened. You can go into the office or I can have someone come by your place.”

Will’s expression is uneasy. “I don’t want that type of attention, Hannibal, I’ve told you that.”

Will puts the car into drive and pulls out onto the road. They drive in silence for little while, but Hannibal can’t let the thing go.

“Are you angry with me, because I didn’t kill him?”

Will sighs. “Have I tried to force you to do what I do?”

“No, Will,” Hannibal says.

“No,” Will repeats. “I’ve barely even encouraged it,” and if that isn’t the perfect truth, Hannibal knows that Will has worked hard to keep it as close to truth as he can. He feels

ashamed of himself. “I know what this does to me, Hannibal, all the good and the bad, but I had to grow into that knowledge after the fact.

“I want you to be able to make your own choices, and I want you to be able to weigh your options and the costs before you do so.”

Hannibal knows that Will intentions are sincere, but even now he doubts that things will go as neatly as that. He thinks that he can accept that reality, though.

He says, “A lot Dolarhyde’s problem was that he knew it would be impossible for his woman to accept what he made of himself. But I know you, Will - we have both been able to survive really seeing one another - and so it’s alright.”

“‘Alright,’” Will repeats, smiling ruefully over the steering wheel.

“I’m really not angry with you,” he says to Hannibal, after a stretch of silence. “But you know who I’m absolutely pissed at?”

“Freddie Lounds.”

“Freddie goddamn Lounds,” Will agrees. “Got it in one. We should ruin her, you and me together, what do you say?”

Hannibal watches Will curiously. “Ruin how?”

“Sue the hell out of her. Get her for libel, for a start, and emotion damage for tonight. Go to the court and say that if she hadn’t printed so much bullshit about you, the Dragon never would have locked onto you as a potential kindred spirit, and if she hadn’t blabbed about our relationship he sure as hell wouldn’t have known where to look for you. That’s all more or less the truth anyway.”

As soon as they were spotted together in St. Louis, during what they had imaged to be the closing moments of the Red Dragon case, Freddie Lounds swept down to make a story of it. She had gotten, somehow, a photo of Will clasping Hannibal’s fingers as they walked together, and extrapolated from there with the most lurid spin possible, a fact that surprised neither of them. Once Will’s name was on the site in association with Hannibal, it would have been easy for the Dragon to find them; often, Will had hosted charity galas in his home, and so his address was not a secret.

Hannibal says, “Not everything she says about me is wrong.”

Will waves a hand in the air, as though brushing the objection away. “I disagree, but that’s almost besides the point. She’s been sued six times already, Hannibal, but each case settled out of court instead of pursuing it. We wouldn’t need to do that. I could spend a decade tying her up in court,” he says, utterly unaware of how profoundly his life will, very soon, change, “keep it in the public eye while we bled her dry with legal fees.

“You just think about it,” Will says, and Hannibal smiles even as he shakes his head, delighted by the offer if not the prospect of the attention that following through on it would

draw.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hannibal arrives at work on Monday morning, he knows almost at once that something is off.

He finds himself the object of intense focus from all quarters. People stop him in the hallway and find their way to his office in a seemingly endless stream to offer their astonishment over the events of two nights before, to praise him for catching the Dragon and to ask after his wellbeing - and more bizarrely, Will's and Beth's, too.

It takes Hannibal, who had believed that very few people outside of readers of Tattle Crime even knew that he was seeing anyone, a bit of time to work out where his well-wishers are getting their information. Eventually, he gathers that Miriam Lass, the young agent that had visited Will over the weekend to get his statement and left feeling thoroughly charmed, is the source of some of what's being said, but the narrative seems to have grown well beyond what Hannibal is sure had been her taciturn comments about the meeting.

He bristles under the attention for a while, reminded far too strongly of the phony solidarity that he'd been offered by his co-workers after he killed the Douglass boy, but then Hannibal starts to understand that this is something very different.

It isn't a reflexive circling of the wagons, driven by a desire to smooth over someone else's transgression for the sake of proactively covering their own asses; These people are genuinely happy that he wasn't hurt. They are really proud of him.

Hannibal doesn't remember it being this way after any of his other catches, not with Stammets' nor any of the ones he collared alive. He wonders if the circumstances of Red Dragon case are so uniquely dramatic that half the Bureau found themselves emotionally invested in the outcome, or if similar comradery might always have been easily available to him, had he just opened up enough to see what was being offered.

It isn't quite that he dislikes the sympathy and praise, but he doesn't know exactly how to take it. He retreats to the employee cafe long before lunch time, trying to find some privacy in which to think.

When Bev tries to sneak up on him, Hannibal feels an acute awareness of being hunted, but at first he thinks that it's in good fun - just another aspect of the day's party atmosphere, and far more welcome than the accolades of relative strangers.

She comes up behind him as silently as she can, then locks her clawed fingers over his shoulders suddenly, trying to startle him. Hannibal doesn't indulge her by jumping, but he turns his head up to smile at her.

"Bev," he says, and allows his face to show how happy he is to see her.

Something that he can't quite catch flashes in her eyes - pity, he thinks later, or maybe regret or anger? - but then she smiles back and says, "How you doing?"

Before Hannibal can answer, she closes her hand over the crown of his head to ruffle his hair. She does this too roughly - hard enough to hurt, actually - but still, it seems a friendly gesture, maybe even sisterly, so he lets her.

It only when Hannibal sees her reach over his shoulder and snatch up from the tabletop a stray hair that she's rustled free that he starts to realize that there's danger in all of this.

"See what I found on the table?" Bev says, loudly enough for the people at the other tables to hear her. "You're losing your hair, old man."

She squeezes his shoulder with her other hand, one last time, and later he will think often about that gesture and what it might have meant.

Then Bev turns and leaves the lunchroom, and as she goes he can see the hair trailing between her fingers like the tail of a deadly asteroid.

Hannibal knows, then. He doesn't yet understand all of the details, but he knows.

He's been found out.

As that knowledge settles into his chest like a block of ice, he is seized by the sudden desire to go after Bev - to sneak up behind her into the hallway and clasp a hand over her mouth and drag her off to some private place where he can strangle the life out of her.

Hannibal thinks maybe the only reason that he doesn't try is because he knows that he wouldn't be able to get away with it.

Then he thinks that maybe it would be good thing, after all, if he was caught.

Instead, he does the only other thing that he can think to do.

He goes to Will.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to save this one to post tomorrow, but I am weak. XD

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will takes Hannibal's concerns seriously, but he is reluctant to accept on the basis of such a seemly small encounter that the game is up.

"I don't think I understand," he says, when Hannibal tells him about the trick that Beverly Katz pulled. "She can't just… do that, can she? Not without a warrant. It can't be admissible."

"DNA evidence is a legally fuzzy area," Hannibal says, flatly and without inflection, as though reporting on something of very little personal significance. "If you discard something… a soda bottle or a cigarette butt, that's usually free game to be collected. That's why she made such a show of picking the hair up off the table. She could argue that it was, essentially, trash that she just picked up. That might hold up in court."

Hannibal's throat works. "God, she's *sharp*."

He is in terrible pain, Will can see. Hannibal feels at once betrayed and outraged by his own sense of betrayal, disgusted that some part of himself would seek to blame the situation on Bev, when when the rest of him so clearly see the issue is his own contemptible nature. Will feels desperate to contain this whirlpool of self-loathing, lest it drag Hannibal further under and catch Will himself in its churning depths as well.

"It wouldn't really matter if it didn't, though," Hannibal goes on. "Bev'll keep everything tight as she can, but this might not even be about DNA right now - she might just be comparing hair strands. I don't know. But it doesn't matter, not really, because she doesn't have to convince the court. She just needs to get enough proof to convince Jack - he'll knock down any wall after that, even if it's legally dubious. And once they pin this to me, Will, it won't matter if they used dodgy methodology early on.

"Serial killers don't walk on technicalities, and that's what they are going to say I am."

Hannibal lifts up his head to look at Will, and his eyes flame with something that may be anger, but is more likely plain unembroidered helplessness. "They're going to look at the way you set the body up, then they're going to look in the case files and they're going to link it up with the others. Every crime of yours is going to look like one of mine."

"Not all," Will says. "Just the ones with the vigilante M.O."

Will's cell phone starts to ring.

"Alana," Will says, looking up from the screen.

“Answer it,” Hannibal says, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

Will does. He lifts the phone to his ear, and Hannibal sees him open his mouth to say “hello,” but before he can Alana is already talking. Hannibal can’t make out what she’s saying, but her voice is urgent.

“No,” Will says, when Alana falls silent, “I haven’t seen Hannibal in a couple of days.”

He pauses. “I’ll be honest with you,” Will says into the phone, and Hannibal sees his eyes dart from one direction to another quickly as he reaches for a lie. “I broke up with him Saturday morning, after I was attacked. Christ, I felt awful about it, but this has all been too much, you know? I’m afraid that I’m not cut out for any of this.”

Alana says something. Listening to her, Will frowns and bites his upper lip. “I don’t know he would have led his co-workers to believe we're still dating, Alana. Maybe he just wasn’t ready to talk about it with the entire Bureau.”

Another pause, but this time Will breaks in before she’s finished talking. “I’m not making excuses, Alana, I hear what you’re saying. That was part of the problem, honestly. It wasn’t just the mess with Dolarhyde and the break-in. He’s so shut off from everyone - I need more openness in a relationship than that. He’s not an emotionally honest person. I know you understand, and I hope you won’t say ‘I told you so,’ though you’d be complete in your rights to do so…”

Hannibal can tell that Will’s blathering on purpose, and that takes some of the sting out of it, but right now every accusation feels justified. All convincing lies are built around a grain of truth, and he watches Will intently, wondering how much of what he’s staying is completely untrue versus what might be sewed from the repurposed fabric of Will’s sincere feelings.

“Hannibal’s not in any trouble, is he?” Will asks, his voice anxious.

Alana’s answer is long. Will breaks in three times to say, “I can’t believe that, Alana,” and a minute later and with more doubt in his voice, “Are you sure? I mean, are you absolutely sure?” Then he says, “ *shit*,” his tone shocked and frightened.

When she falls silent, Will tells her, “Alana, I don’t look for him to come after me. I can’t believe he’d do anything to harm me,” but he bleeds unease into his voice as he says this.

When he puts the phone down, Will says, “They know. We need to move fast.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been waiting forever to write this one (as well as the one that comes after, which is going to be even more fun I hope).

"Hannibal lifts up his head to look at Will, and his eyes flame with something that may be anger, but is more likely plain unembroidered helplessness," was inspired by a similar line in Jon Clinch's novel "Finn."

Chapter 20

“If you were to stab me - say that I broke up with you, or for some other reason you felt maddeningly betrayed - where would you do it?” Will asks Hannibal.

The answer comes to Hannibal’s mind more quickly than he can will to pass through his lips. “In the belly,” he tells Will, then turns his head, afraid that Will may try to make him explain why.

Will already knows, of course. “Christ, Hannibal, you really are lovesick, aren’t you?”

“You haven’t any room to talk.”

“We make a fine pair, don’t we?" Will says, conceding the point with a fond smile. "Come here and show me how you would do it.”

Hannibal steps close to Will. Watching him carefully, he curls his hand around the back of Will’s neck, bracing his fingers against the base of the skull. Hannibal presses the side of his fist against Will’s middle, just above the navel, and feels the way Will’s respiration picks up.

Will leans in to kiss Hannibal, and Hannibal curls his fingers in Will's hair and presses him closer. Hannibal holds Will for as long as he will allow it.

When Will finally pulls back, his lips parted and his breathing ragged, Hannibal sees the decision Will has has already reached solidifying itself further in his eyes.

“I’m not going to lose you,” Will says, and he cuts an opening in the blood bag that he holds against his belly, just below where Hannibal is touching him. Will slips the knife back into his own pocket as the still-hot blood begins to spill from the bag, soaking his jeans and flowing down to the floor. Hannibal sees the droplets splatter on the tips of his shoes, and he tries to back away, but Will catches him by the collar of his shirt.

“It’s just blood,” Will reassures him. “You aren’t scared of blood, Hannibal.”

“No,” Hannibal says, and it feels strange to him, how badly he wants to cry, now that Will has chosen him over everything else. “But it’s your blood.”

For a long time now, Hannibal has been frightened of being responsible for the shedding of more of Will’s blood. That’s what’s happening now, though indirectly, and it shames him.

And Hannibal is very worried, also, that Will has taken from himself more than he can safely afford to lose.

Just an hour ago Hannibal was sitting next to Will, watching his blood flow from the needle that Will had inserted himself, through the IV line and into the blood bag. “Are you sure you

really need to do this?" Hannibal asked uneasily.

"I can't be caught, Hannibal," Will told him. "And I can't be an accomplice. So that means that I have to be dead. There are people who are counting on me who will suffer, otherwise."

"I can think of some people who will suffer from believing that you're dead."

"I know it," Will said, and sent him upstairs with a pair of gloves, the combination to his bedroom safe and instructions as to what to pack.

There was in the safe $40,000, which Will assured him would not be missed, should his accounts be closely examined following his "death," as well as a quantity of men's and women's jewelry, so considerably old in style and craftsmanship that Hannibal guesses it must have belonged to Will's grandparents before his parents, and which Will said he has neglected to include on his insurance inventory.

There are deeds and other important papers in the safe, too, but these Hannibal ignores. He finds three sets of false IDs, passports and other papers that match Will's own face, though none for Hannibal himself. Hannibal derives from this that the potentiality of needing to run has been on Will's mind for some time, but that he has either not considered the possibility that Hannibal might, by necessity or his own free choice, flee with him, or else hadn't yet had a chance to plan for such an eventuality. He put the false papers in the bag and closes the safe, then he takes the gloves off and put them in his pockets.

He's been instructed to take only a single change of Will's clothing, something quiet and unassuming that won't be missed, but a brown jacket in the closet caught Hannibal's eye. Baggy on Will, he thought that it would fit himself well enough, and he saw therefore no reason not to take it; he could, after all, imagine himself doing just that in the scenario that they are acting out, for reasons both practical and sentimental.

Hannibal took, also, what possessions of his own that have gravitated their way into Will's closet and dresser, as well as the ultra soft set of flannel pajamas that Will gifted him with the night that he killed Mason.

Near the back of the closet, Hannibal found other things obviously intended for him, though Will had yet to present him with these gifts. Hannibal's hands pass slowly over the soft sweaters to find suit jackets, linen shirts and crisp slacks, and it's easy for him to imagine Will's eagerness to bring these things home and hold them in waiting for the right moment to show Hannibal, regardless of the fact that they would have to be taken back to the tailor's to be adjusted to his measurements.

He'd never really worn jeans before he met Will, but back at his home (to which he will never again return) there are two pairs that Will gave him hanging in his closet, and now he finds half a dozen others here. Will has a uncanny eye for Hannibal's dimensions, and he knew without taking the jeans down that they would be a perfect fit, scandalously comfortable and cut just so to accentuate his ass.

Hannibal was conscious of the weight of affection that these objects represented, the way that they symbolized Will's hopes for their future together, but they were primarily big ticket

items, flashy and apt to attract notice, so he packs only two pairs of jeans and a couple of the more muted, solid colored shirts, adding as almost an afterthought a black sweater that he was quite certain is cashmere.

It is starting to get chilly in Baltimore. It might be colder where they are headed, wherever that might be.

When he came down stairs, bags in hand, Hannibal tried to make a joke of the money. “How much do you charge for an office visit, when it isn’t on the FBI’s tab?”

“I’m good at my job, Hannibal,” Will said, a bit peevishly.

And Hannibal wanted to say that he was, too, but that he didn’t have tens of thousands of dollars stocked away for his bug-out bag, but then he realized that as of tonight they would both be unemployed.

Coming closer, he saw that Will looked a bit pale. “Are you almost done with that?” he asked, motioning with his eyes towards the blood bag.

“Soon,” Will said, and sent him out to the garage with a second set of instructions.

That took him a bit of time, and when he came back Will was looking absolutely pallid. Hannibal came to him and crouched in front of his chair to put a hand on Will’s forehead. The skin was clammy, cool to the touch.

Hannibal looked up at the blood bag, which was nearly full. “Is that the second one?” he asked, suspicious.

“Third,” Will said, and gave him a sickly smile.

Hannibal cursed. “That’s enough, Will.”

“Just another minute.”

“Stop now.”

“It has to look convincing,” Will said, as though speaking as the voice of reason.

"Will it look convincing enough if you go into cardiac arrest? Take the needle out now or l'll do it for you.”

Will’s upper lip twitched in the barest hint of a snarl.

“That’s my expression, Will, and it isn’t at all subtle on you,” Hannibal told him, but at least Will did as asked.

Now, Will is backing away from Hannibal, and the unsteadiness of his feet, Hannibal thinks, isn’t entirely a performance calculated to leave the desired pattern of footsteps in the smeared

blood.

When he comes up against the counter, Will reached back and picks up the two units of blood that he'd set there ahead of time, then he slides down to the floor. He sits the first, now empty, bag aside and cut open the second, letting its contents dribble out and pool around him. The kitchen smells like a butcher's shop.

When he opens the third bag, Will lets his body droop over to the side like a dying flower. He twitches his legs, feebly, and lets the back of his hand flop against the side of the counter, leaving a red smear.

Watching him, Hannibal can see the exact picture Will's painting for the investigators, and in it Hannibal stands over him and waits for Will to bleed out. In it, Will goes into convulsions before he dies.

For a moment, it seems possible to Hannibal that he might have done such a thing - seems possible even that this is a real thing that he's watching, Will dying in front of him by Hannibal's own hand - and a chill passes through him.

He knows that neither he nor Will are crazy in the way that Dolarhyde was, but he suspects also that neither of them are entirely sane. What they are doing now is crazy, he knows perfectly well, though Will has said that it's their best shot and Hannibal can't help but agree.

From below him, Will says, "Pick me up now," and Hannibal approaches and does so, careful not to slip in the blood.

Carrying him cradled against his body, Hannibal takes him out into the garage and lays Will in the trunk of the Fury. Then he picks him up again, noting the evocative shape of the smear of blood Will's body has left on the interior.

He puts Will on his feet on a tarp that Hannibal has laid down on the empty side of the garage, and Will strips out of his bloody clothing and begins to clean his skin, as well as he can, with handfuls of baby wipes.

Hannibal does the same, but standing on the bare pavement. The bloody footprints and smears he leaves in the process will tell their own piece of the story.

When they have rubbed away as much of the blood as they can, they dress in clean clothing. Hannibal bunches his own spoiled outfit in the trash can, but Will's he bundles up in the tarp and stores in the back seat of the Fury. They will get rid of it before they dump the hot rod for a less ostentatious stolen car, some fifty miles from here.

He opens the back door of the car for Will, and he climbs in on top of another tarp and pulls the rest of it down over him. If any of the neighbors' watch the car leave, it will see to them that Hannibal is its sole occupant.

Last of all, Hannibal goes inside and taking Beth from her crate, carries her out to the car. He puts her in the back and Will calls Beth over to him to rest in the foot well near his head, holding her leash in his fist, keeping it short so she can't show herself by peering out the

window. Hannibal puts the folded up crate and Beth's other belongings in the back with Will too.

Pulling out onto the road, Hannibal uses the rearview mirror to look into the backseat, where Will is a nearly still mass beneath the tarp, and he is struck again by that feeling that this is all more real than it’s meant to be.

“Talk to me, Will,” he says. “Tell me where we are going.”

And, though he is weary, Will does.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Drifting in and out of a hypovolemic haze, Will watches Hannibal drive on as the night settles in around them.

He tries to make lists - things that they need to get or that they will need to do to stay free and fleet. A legal car. False papers for Hannibal. Plane tickets for some place far from here, probably. More immediately; scissors and hair dye, new clothing, assorted toiletries. Something real to eat, something other than gas station beef jerky and candy bars.

Will thinks that Hannibal might perk up if he got a decent hot meal. Or at least, he'd like to hope that might make a difference.

The issue of *Tattle Crime* is bunched up in the glovebox, safely out of sight - but Will knows, not out of mind. He knows that the story and its accusations cut at Hannibal, and deeply, and that he is still bleeding from it. There will be many more stories like that one - scandalized accounts of Hannibal's depredations, real and staged and misattributed - to say nothing of the manhunt that is doubtlessly by now in full swing.

Up ahead of them, yellow headlights spill out onto the road from the median.

"Speed trap," Will says, unnecessarily.

When the light falls on them Hannibal flinches like a hunted thing.

They both look into the rear view mirror. The cop doesn't pull out after them.

Will remembers to breathe. He tries to ignore how fast his heart is beating.

"That's what it's going to be like, from now on," Hannibal says, looking straight ahead over the wheel.

"Only for a while," Will says. He believes this to be the truth.

"For the rest of my life," Hannibal insists dully.

It seems counterproductive to try to argue with him, and Will turns his head to look out the window.

But Hannibal has, it seems, been making his own lists. He says now, "What are your patients going to do without you?"

"I'm not the only psychologist in Baltimore, Hannibal. They'll see someone else, is all. They'll be fine." He says this without entirely believing it. Some of his patients are extremely fragile, and they will find the circumstances of his 'death' highly disturbing. He can only

hope that they will find someone skilled to help them cope with the shock and with whom they can continue their therapy.

“You’re not really a psychologist any more though, are you? That’s not work that you’re going to be able to resume.” He goes on before Will can formulate an answer. “What about the dogs - who’s going to look after them?”

“The same caretaker who looks after them when I’m away from home,” Will says, and winces at his own words because he can see Hannibal add his family estate to the list of things that Will has lost today. “They’re covered in my will, Hannibal. Don't worry.”

He’s bone tired, and he can feel the dizziness closing in again. Will closes his eyes, but Hannibal isn’t done.

“Bev,” he says. Will looks up at Hannibal, sighing internally, and sees Hannibal’s throat working. “She’s too smart to blame herself, but she’s going to be so… disappointed. And Dr. Bloom will hold herself accountable - this is going to wound her deeply, isn’t it?

“Then there’s Margot. I suppose you won’t see the boy ever again.”

“I’m going to talk to Margot soon. She’ll help us.” And, because he’s badly worried that won’t go the way he hopes, he feels his own frustration welling up. “Is there a point to this conversation?”

“All of this is my fault.”

“Oh, I understand now. We’re doing self-flagellation. I'd rather we didn't.”

Hannibal will not be knocked off course. “You warned me that it dangerous to get too close. I didn’t listen." And he repeats, “This is my fault.”

“It’s done with, Hannibal.”

Hannibal runs a hand down his face. “This was a bad idea - we shouldn’t have tired this. The price for you is too high.”

Anxiety skitters around in Will’s mind like a trapped rat. “You let me worry about the costs, Hannibal.”

Hannibal goes on as though he hasn’t spoken.

“If you kill me,” Hannibal says, with damnable rationality, “you can tell them that I forced you to come along this far. You can say that I hurt you and kidnapped you and that you killed me in self-defense. You’d be believed, Will - you’re good at lying. It's not too late to put everything back to normal.”

“Pull over,” Will says.

Hannibal does. The gravel rattles beneath the undercarriage as the car comes to a stop on the side of the road.

Will unbuckles his seat belt so he can turn to face Hannibal. When he speaks, he hears the barely suppressed fury in his own voice. “Listen to me very carefully, Hannibal,” Will says. “Are you listening?” He waits for Hannibal to raise his chin in mute affirmation. “You will never say anything like that to me again. Do you understand me?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer. Under the dome light, he can see Hannibal’s throat tighten, and the way his eyes have gone glassy. He’s shamed Hannibal, Will knows, but that’s just fine.

“Are you feeling suicidal?”

Hannibal considers that before he answers. “No, Will. I don’t think so.”

“Alright,” Will says. “That’s good. If you get to feeling that way you tell me, and we’ll talk through it. I’ll help you. But don’t you ever fucking ask me to hurt you again.”

“I was thinking about your best interests.”

“My interests are tied up with yours, you jackass. Don't you dare do this to me, after everything that’s happen. Don't hurt me like this again.”

They get back on the road, and Hannibal cries for a little while, absolutely silently. Will gives him the space to do it.

When it ends, Hannibal looks a little better than he did before. Will supposes he needed to get some of it out - and more than that, needed to hear what Will told him.

Will’s own head is throbbing, but he reaches out to touch Hannibal’s cheek, and when he looks at him, Will digs deep and finds a smile to give him.

“Things are going to turn out just fine,” Will promises him. “I’m going to take care of us.”

He can see that Hannibal is, at least, trying his best to believe that.

For right now, that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of this story, but not the series.

It might be a few days until I am able to start the next story, as I've got thesis work to wrap up and I'm still sussing out the plot-line of the next story, but there will be more coming.

Chapter 22

Heads up because AO3 doesn't seem to be sending out "new story in series" notifications (or else there's just a loooong lag today) but the first chapter of the new fic is posted here.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!